In my first month in Chiang Mai, Thailand, I asked to sit in on a Thai radio programming broadcast by my placement, a grassroots organization called the Migrant Assistance Program (MAP) that seeks to empower migrants from neighboring Myanmar. At that point, I hadn’t started at MAP yet, and I thought the experience would be good practice for picking up the five tones of the Thai language. I was greeted energetically by Pii DJ Jan Dtip (“Pii” being the honorific one uses in Thai to address someone older than oneself). Although my Thai was very basic just a month into my Luce year, I had been in Chiang Mai long enough to know that a huge smile goes a long way.

I set myself up on the other side of the glass from where Pii DJ Jan Dtip sat, and I must have understood all of 7% of what was being broadcast over the radio in the program’s first hour. Just as my mind began to wander, I heard Pii DJ Jan Dtip intermittently say “Isaaaaa” (my nickname in rising tone), farang (ฝรั่ง: the Thai word for western foreigners, mid tone), and “I love youuuu” (spoken in English, rising tone) over the airwaves. Of course, I thought, “I must have imagined it. I’m here to be a fly on the wall.” Alas, I had not imagined it. I was very much in the room, and Pii DJ Jan Dtip had been quick to notify her audience of that undeniable fact.

Sometime during the second hour, Pii DJ Jan Dtip knocked on the glass between us and beckoned for me to join her on the other side where she sat holding up a phone receiver—a call-in listener hoping to speak to me.

“Hello (สวัสดี)?” I ask in Thai.

“Hello, Isaaaa. I love youuuu!” someone says in English on the other line.

In Thai, I ask, “What’s your name? Where do you live? What’s your favorite food?”

Then I run out of questions and say thank you and goodbye. I hang up. Pii DJ Jan Dtip laughs because it’s funny. I laugh because I’m confused.

Little did I know that this moment would mark the beginning of my journey navigating a new environment.

At MAP I’ve had the unique experience of working alongside Shan (an ethnic group in Southeast Asia) and Myanmar migrants in Thailand—all of whom are well versed in the intricacies of navigating a new environment. My primary role within MAP has been to document the work of my colleagues in schools, hospitals, and the larger community as they connect migrants to the support services they need. I’ve been fortunate to receive the same patience and empathy from my co-workers that it takes to do that work as I learn what it means to
live well in Thailand, specifically for those with limited, or no, legal status in the country.

Throughout this process, the phrase I dreaded most in the English language, “I don’t understand,” has become a great tool in Thai. “I don’t understand. Please speak slowly (ไม่เข้าใจ ครุ่นเครียดช้า ๆ).” I’ve grown accustomed to admitting my lack of knowledge and embracing my role as a beginner. In doing so, I’ve created space for new knowledge to build upon itself.

With six precious months left in my Luce year, I look forward to more learning and laughable moments to come.  

EMILY DICKEY  
LIVING IN Kathmandu, Nepal  
PLACED AT The Story Kitchen

When I first got to Kathmandu, my favorite thing to do was pick a point on my phone’s map and just start walking. It astonished me how quickly the thrilling, if sometimes overwhelming, honking and bustle of the city receded. After an hour on foot, I would be in Newari villages otherwise inaccessible to vehicles other than the most intrepid motorbikes. Women sat outside weaving, and the small roads were full of ducks and goats. On my first walk, I met an elderly woman who took me to her home. It sat on a hillside overlooking the Nakhu River. The loudest noise was the wind in the rice fields.

Observing the stark differences between daily life in Kathmandu compared to just a few miles away made me start to think about distance and connection in relative terms, shaped as much by infrastructure as by actual miles. My work at The Story Kitchen has made me think a lot about distance and connection between people, too.

In the past month I’ve had the privilege of tagging along with colleagues as they tape and film interviews with women who were affected by Nepal’s civil war. I spend these interviews trying to listen, my pen only able to catch fleeting words like “blood,” “pain,” and “disappeared,” before the conversation flows on, faster than I can understand. My notes often read like jagged, bleak poems when I look back at them. It’s surreal and unmooring to know that I may be listening to a woman divulging deep trauma but lack the language skills to empathize in the moment. I struggle with questions about what my role is and whether my presence is helpful, harmful, or neutral.

These experiences have made me so grateful for my colleagues who sit down with me afterward and help me understand and process, and for the shopkeepers in my neighborhood whom I buy tea and samosas from, who are generous with my attempts to speak and always willing to explain. They remind me that there are teachers everywhere. I hope their example will make me a more compassionate and patient teacher in the future.

I spent Christmas Eve on a field visit in the Terai region. We were hosting a “Storytelling for Empowerment” workshop with women who had survived violence during the civil war. We had gathered to sing and dance, as we did every night of the workshop. I was a little homesick. I decided to video call my mom, perhaps to ease the dissonance within me that was building after a week of absorbing these women’s stories of suffering, after entering their worlds through their words and feeling how different their experiences were from my own.

After a couple seconds of “connecting,” my mom’s face appeared. I gave a little squeak and yelled out to the room in my blunt Nepali, “Mero aama (my mother)! The reactions from the women were instantaneous. They gathered around the phone, laughing and eagerly passing it around. A woman who had struggled to express herself all week began to sing a clear, haunting song directly into the phone, causing the room to hush. I saw that my mom’s eyes were leaking.

Afterward, I told this woman that her song had been so beautiful that it moved my mom to tears. She told me that she had been singing her pain and that my mom must have been able to understand that even if she couldn’t understand the words. At this mid-year point, I am full of questions about what we can do in the face of other people’s pain. One thing I feel sure about, though, is that I am thankful to be on a fellowship that values the importance of human connection across disparity.
The past six months have been punctuated by a series of memorable awakenings. In a literal sense, there were early mornings—flights and hikes and work that began before sunrise—the sounds of new languages, and eye-opening experiences. Metaphorically, I have painstakingly reexamined what it means to be a maker, to teach, and to engage in a completely new socio-cultural context. My eyes are widening, stretching to take it all in.

On the last morning of our Luce mid-year meeting in Thailand, I awoke to three emergency messages from my mentor, artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, requesting that I help fix some issues with her installation in the Singapore Biennale before my return to Chiang Mai. Addressed to me, her gallerist, and the curators of the biennale, the emails stated ominously that she would, otherwise, be forced to withdraw her work from this significant, international exhibition. I immediately crammed my belongings into my backpack and jumped in a cab to the airport, without the faintest idea what I would do once I got to Singapore.

Walking into the darkened space in the Singapore Art Museum, I was immediately enveloped by six large projections swaying gently on white silk screens. Presented with a diversity of images—from a buffalo in agonizing death throes to a disembodied hand carefully writing in cursive—I found myself pacing the space in search of the perfect vantage point. The carefully considered arrangement of screens demanded movement throughout the space, combining disparate visual and auditory information in order to form a visceral understanding of the installation.

Since my arrival in Chiang Mai, Araya had folded me into this project for the biennale by including me as an actor in one of the videos and arranging a panel discussion about the work between a film critic and myself, even asking me to write a formal critique. I felt very close to the work and had seen it in several iterations, watching its progression over several months. As I assessed the project conceptually and technically, while mediating between Araya and the curatorial team at the same time, I found myself torn between the practical considerations of an institution, curatorial pragmatism, and an artist’s unflinching vision for the impact of her work. Araya is not concerned with salability, trends, or taste; she makes her work because it is needed, and it needs to be presented accurately.

After just a few minutes with the installation on site that day, it was clear that the main issue was the sound, or lack thereof. The curators had insisted on a system of directional speakers that were weak and tinny. In the two previous iterations of the work I had experienced, the sound was powerful and resonated in my body. It had functioned as the primary actor rather than an accompaniment to the images. After four days with numerous meetings and technical assistance, the sound finally gave power to the installation.

Working with Araya has cracked a shell within my own art making and perception. She lives her work every waking moment. Founding the Department of Multidisciplinary Art, spaying and neutering stray dogs, taking daily bicycle rides, giving alms to the monks in her village, writing, and making art are all equally important to her art practice. This realization, combined with the incredible depth, intensity, and socio-cultural import of her work, resulted in several months of inability to make my own work when I first arrived in Thailand. I would start and then quickly abandon sculptures, unable to prove their import in light of this new yardstick.
But after several months dedicated to learning Thai, teaching at the university, and assisting Araya, I have now found an allowance in these questions, a space where my art practice can be used as a means of exploration into the unknown. If this is what it feels like to open my eyes, even just a crack, I can only imagine what this next year will bring.

ELIZABETH LINTON
Living in Singapore
Placed at Centre for Ageing Research and Education Duke-NUS Medical School National University of Singapore

In July, I learned the Malay proverb, “Sedikit sedikit lama lama jadi bukit.” Translated into English, it reads, “Little by little, over time, it will become a hill.” This saying reminds listeners to save money gradually, even in small amounts, in preparation for the future. Seemingly insignificant investments grow over time. This saying also aptly characterizes my Luce year in Singapore. Little by little, over time, penny-sized, daily experiences like finding and chopping a table during hawker center lunch-time madness, befriending neighbors, and perfectly timing an outing to catch the last MRT train of the day, have accumulated into a treasure chest of invaluable experiences that will forever enrich how I view the world.

Little by little, I am learning the intricacies of the Malay language. Despite having “newscaster” (read: unnatural) pronunciation and diction, the bits of vocabulary and grammar I have learned widen my understanding of Singapore’s geography and regional political history. The country became more physically accessible as I learned how street and neighborhood names map onto physical features and historic events (Jalan Bukit Merah means “red hill road,” while Paya Lebar was once a “wide swamp”). When traveling in the Philippines, I was delighted to discover Malay words in Tagalog like balik (return) and lelaki (man), evidence of a long history of maritime trade of goods, language, and culture in Southeast Asia.

Over time, I witnessed the interconnected roles that the medical research, public policy and social service delivery sectors play in creating a Singapore that is a cohesive kampong and city for people of all ages. As a research associate at the Centre for Ageing Research and Education (CARE) at Duke-NUS Medical School, I have the opportunity to collaborate with policy makers, service providers, and researchers to investigate what successful ageing looks like. Through research projects such as an evaluation of the National Silver Academy, a lifelong learning initiative, I’ve come to understand that research has maximum impact when conducted in collaboration with—instead of on—fellow community members. At CARE’s 2016 annual conference, researchers from Europe and Asia gathered to discuss the question “Are centenarians the realization of successful ageing?” I learned about the challenges of doing national registry validation in low-resource settings, the complexity of conducting coordinated research in multilingual contexts, and how standardized measures of frailty and mobility are affected by different cultural norms. I also had the privilege of meeting and reading interviews with Singaporean centenarians. They wisely taught me to “make good of the time you have.” This and, “You live better when you work with yourself” are two lessons that I hope never to forget.

Over the remaining months in my Luce Year, I’m excited to continue looking outward and experiencing life in Singapore, as well as looking inward and reflecting on my place as an American in this country. Little by little, I’ve started to make sense of the kaleidoscope of people with different nationalities, ethnicities, languages, beliefs, and life stories who now call Singapore home. There are pioneers who survived the Japanese Invasion, silently marveling at (and sometimes bemoaning) how much the country has changed during their lifetime. There are enterprising designers who turn their homes into high-fashion runways. There are overseas workers from across the world flocking to the “Little Red Dot” that is Singapore in pursuit of employment opportunities and new beginnings. There are local students, some optimistic, some nervous, about life prospects after school. I’m truly humbled by all the people whom I’ve met and who have touched my life in Singapore. Because of them, little by little, over time, it has become a hill.
One of my first friends in Cambodia was the grounds-keeper from my Khmer Language Program. I met her on my second day in Cambodia and was told to call her “Om”—a polite term to refer to an older woman that more or less means “Aunt.” Every morning I’d pass Om on my walk to class. She would say things to me in Khmer while I panicked because I had no idea what she was saying or how I was supposed to respond. I explained this to an advisor from home and she, like Om, laughed at me. Her advice was to sit with Om, smile and occasionally try holding her hand. The next week, I started spending my ten-minute break from class sitting with Om and asking her childlike questions, having a vague understanding of the things she would say back to me.

“How is your day?”
“Stop talking to me. Eat this and go back to class.”

By the end of the six-week program I’d graduated to piecing together basic conversations that almost always ended with her giving me strange fruits and shooing me back into the classroom.

Living and working in Cambodia is amazing and chaotic and confusing and exciting and often feels impossible to explain. My work, much like navigating Phnom Penh, is a balancing act of understanding and respecting Cambodia’s complicated history, while simultaneously making room for the rapid change and development shaping its socioeconomic and political future.

I’ve spent the past six months working with the Department of Archaeology and Prehistory under the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. The majority of my time is spent in the conservation labs of the National Museum, focusing on the restoration of ceramic, stone, and metal artifacts. The rest of my time is spent working with staff of the Ministry of Culture to develop potential forensic projects focusing on victims of the Khmer Rouge regime. At work I speak in a confusing (and occasionally amusing) mixture of Khmer, French, and English. The experience allows me to re-evaluate my work in that I’m no longer able to hide behind the polite linguistic nuances that shape most of my professional experiences. At one point, a colleague asked me to explain what I did as an archaeologist before this fellowship. When asked this question in English, I usually explain that I worked as a forensic archaeological technician with a company that focuses on recovering American soldiers killed in the Pacific theatre during World War II. In Khmer, the best translation I could think of was, “I am an archaeologist; I work with bones. I try to find soldiers so they can go back to their families.”

Learning to exist in a language extremely foreign to my own introduces a degree of simplicity and vulnerability that means constantly re-evaluating the ways in which I engage and position myself in the world.

On some days, work means burying myself in case studies about genocides and mass graves analysis around the world to better understand the processes of repatriation and reparation. On other days it means walking around the Museum learning how to repair and restore impossibly beautiful prehistoric stone sculptures. On almost all days, I end with strange fruits and more questions.
There is no good way to get to Gatlang. Located at an elevation of 2,600 meters and a mere 30 kilometers from the border of Tibet, the route to the village where I do my research is the worst road I have ever experienced. From landslides to stalled buses to torrential downpours, from reckless jeep drivers to knee-deep mud to army checkpoints, traversing the 150 kilometers from Kathmandu to Gatlang is a ten-hour, white-knuckled, hang-on-to-your-neighbor-for-dear-life ordeal. And, I love every second of it. Like travelling to Gatlang, the wild, breathtaking adventure that was the first half of my Luce year taught me to face my fears and hang onto my neighbors as we help each other navigate the bumpy roads of life in Nepal.

I make the journey to Gatlang about once every three months. There, I study Parvati Kunda, a small, high-altitude wetland that is the only source of drinking water for the 3,000 people in the village. I am working with my placement organization, Wildlife Conservation Nepal (WCN), to establish a baseline dataset of water quality and wetland biodiversity, as well as to assess potential water management strategies. I love this research project, but working in Gatlang forces me out of my comfort zone. For example, purchasing lab supplies involves ducking into dark, dusty surgical-supply shops, rummaging around for plastic funnels and filter paper, and heckling with the shopkeepers in Nepali. Interviews with Gatlang community members stretch my language skills to the maximum—people in Gatlang speak a mixture of Tamang and Nepali, and although my colleagues conduct the interviews, it is my job to translate the hastily-written script into English. As I slowly make my way through accounts of decreasing snowpack, the disappearance of frogs and other animals, and the relentless advance of aggressive plants that grow better in a warmer climate, I am reminded that the conservation of Parvati Kunda is critical for the very existence of Gatlang, and I approach my work with renewed motivation.

Although Gatlang is the focus of my research, I spend most of my time in Kathmandu. There are aspects of life in the city that make me yearn for the highlands: dark alleyways, growling street dogs, exhaust fumes, and polluted rivers. But I also treasure the glimpse of the Himalayas on my way to work, the rhododendrons blooming in the courtyard, and the scent of jeera wafting out of kitchen windows. Most of all, I value my Nepali friends who help make doctor’s appointments and teach me Nepali folk songs on guitar. Long runs around ancient temples, Saturday afternoons at the snooker club, and feasts of dal-bhaat (lentil soup and rice, the absolute staple of Nepali cuisine) overshadow my fear and make life in Kathmandu rich, full, and wonderful.

The closer I become to my Nepali friends, the more I understand the incredible challenges the country has faced over the last decade. The civil war, though it ended in 2008, still echoes through the inefficient political system and the empty spaces left by conflict-related murders. Then, just as the country began to recover, the devastating 2015 earthquake flattened buildings, paralyzed infrastructure, and left deep scars on the collective Nepali psyche. It is one thing to read about these disasters, but it is another thing entirely to hear painful, first-hand accounts from close friends. Their grace and wisdom in the face of hardship inspires me every day. Sometimes, we sit on the roof and silently watch the sun go down over the hills, and we are grateful just to be together.

I have many goals for the next six months: to continue improving my Nepali and Tamang language skills, to better understand Nepal’s complicated political history, and to connect with the numerous environmental conservation efforts in and around Kathmandu. I will return to Gatlang at least twice more to continue my research. There will be many more challenges but also another six months full of adventures that I cannot wait to experience.
What is this?” the eldest of the female parliamentarians asks, after rummaging through the box on the table in the conference room.

“That is a dildo,” Htar Htar, the founder and director of my host organization, Akhaya Women, says matter-of-factly. She demonstrates how one might use it. Another parliamentarian snaps a photo of the pink sex toy in her hand.

Some of the other female parliamentarians nod; others frown. A few still look confused despite the demonstration.

At this point I have been working for Akhaya, a local women’s organization based in Yangon, for several months, but this is my first time in the field observing the organization’s Women’s Empowerment Training in practice.

Htar Htar sits there patiently, waiting for more questions as the parliamentarians continue to explore the contents of the box. And boy, do they have questions. After Htar Htar has explained the functions of a strap-on, vibrator, lubricant, and Fleshlight, a younger parliamentarian picks up a slender blue object. “And this?” The female parliamentarians gather around and take turns guessing.

“It’s a tampon,” says Htar Htar finally, and she again plays show and tell. Many of the women appear to be in awe.

And I am too. Not only because I do not realize our training covers sex toys, but also because here are twenty of the most powerful, educated women in Myanmar—two of whom are doctors!—and not one of them knows what a tampon is, let alone has ever used one before. I know well the norms around menstruation and women’s sexuality in Myanmar—where marital rape is still legal, there is no equivalent for the word “vagina,” and many still believe menstrual blood is dirty—but it is one thing to read a report and another to have it played out before your eyes.

The session ends and we are drinking tea and eating tasty pancakes soaked with honey when Htar Htar sidles up to me and asks if I have a tampon. Apparently one of the female parliamentarians is on her period and wants to go swimming.

“She thought she’d give tampons a try.”

The last time I worked abroad, I was often harassed. While I found ways to respond, over time, those experiences have shaped the way I feel and behave in public spaces.

That said, I have never felt safer in any city, abroad or Stateside, than I do in Yangon. And yet, I have noticed the vestiges of the wall I built to protect myself in the past—it comes up when someone asks where I live as way of small talk on my bus commute or when someone tries to sell me something on the street. I know, and worry, that this restrained vulnerability could mean forgoing potentially meaningful, insightful engagement with people in my community, but it is difficult to unlearn.

Meanwhile, I recognize that many women in Yangon have experiences here that are familiar but different from mine—stories of public masturbation, sexual harassment on buses, catcalling and stalking on the street.

In the second half of my Luce year, I look forward to a deeper role at Akhaya. I will be supporting the expansion of its new Women in Politics program, which will match experienced female parliamentarians with newly elected ones, and will provide them with legislative and policy support, the majority of whom do not have office staff or support. I will also spend much more time in the field with our trainers, local partners, and the communities we support. I am honored to continue learning from and working alongside pioneering women like our 25-year-old communications officer who confided in me early on that this was her side hustle—she is actually a recently licensed pilot (something very few women can say in Myanmar).
Recently, I watched the Coldplay video “Hymn for the Weekend.” In case you missed it, it’s the one they shot in India. Chris Martin and the band threw colors at each other as if it was Holi, and Beyoncé donned mehendi (henna) and played a Bollywood heroine. When the video was first released, I didn’t care to see it, as it was drawing major criticism for its cultural appropriation and orientalism. My good friend Jordon, a Pop and R&B artist, is currently with me in Delhi—he’s collaborating with a musician here named Ramya, and we’re filming a music video this week. Our project aims to highlight the parallels between the socio-political situations of the United States and India, and offer an attitude of global solidarity rather than isolated nationalism. So, I thought I would check out Coldplay’s adventure in India, perhaps as a “what not to do.”

What rings most false to me about Coldplay’s video is that it places India firmly within an uncomplicated past, while the members of the band are clearly arriving from the present. For example, they somehow find themselves in a Bombay movie theater that still uses analog film projection—there might be some hipster cinema house in Bandra that still does this for its vintage novelty, but I’ve never heard of one. Even in the most remote, rural communities, modernity entangles with old traditions. I interviewed a few cotton farmers in Tamil Nadu who had built their house with mud walls and a thatch roof—but of course, they still had a satellite dish attached to the top.

If there’s anything I’ve learned about this extremely complicated country in my six months here, it’s this: India is a place where anything is possible, and everything is happening all at once, no matter how contradictory things may seem. Every day I learn more, and every day, I feel like I know less.

Here in New Delhi, I ground myself with the incredible individuals I have met. I work at a small film company called Jamun (named after a fruit native to the region that turns your tongue purple). Everyday in the office, I look forward to our conversations and our heated debates. My mentors, Ayesha and Udayan, encourage rigorous political discussion, while Anukriti, my coworker who’s fascinated with American pop culture, keeps me up to date on the latest Kim and Kanye news. At home, I live with my two roommates, Koval and Namratha, who have become my sisters this year. Koval is the head of her own film company called A Little Anarky and is a self-described militant feminist. Namratha works in public health and runs a dog training business on the side, Pawsitive Tales. There’s also Ginger, Namratha’s golden retriever—she’s a pampered princess, but in recent months, she’s been branching out and gaining more street cred with the stray dogs who live on our block.

When I think about what I’ll take from this year, I imagine it will be like a collection of charms, rather than one cohesive chain. India is too massive a place, too diverse, and too dynamic to draw any comprehensive conclusions about the country as a whole. But I’ll hold on to some things safe in my memory, like those late nights with my roommates spent on Namratha’s Tinder profile, Koval and I swiping left through all the options Delhi has to offer her, our stomachs hurting from too much laughter. I’ll hold on to the warm chai and spicy maggi from the mountain dhabas after long bus rides and too little sleep. And I’ll hold on to those moments when I thought I had something about this city completely figured out, but then my assumptions turned out to be wildly wrong. I’ll wear these charms proudly, and I’ll know that in the future, they’ll remind me that I can always return and collect more.

Kaytie Nielsen
Living in New Delhi, India
Placed at The Jamun Collective

Kaytie next to a sign displaying an old Hindi saying, “Safety first, or expect the worst,” on her hike to a peak in Kotgarh, Himachal Pradesh.

Dustin Palmer
Living in Yangon, Myanmar
Placed at MyJustice

I first smell my neighborhood come to life—the frying garlic and chilies wafting up from the ground floor kitchen of the old Brutalist public housing unit. Then I hear it. Entrepreneurial salespeople bellow through the streets, selling breakfast parathas, beautiful bouquets of freshly cut flowers, or long...
bamboo poles with which to hang laundry. Then, I look out the window: men slurping mohinga (fish soup) in the tiny tea-shop across the street; robed monks (saffron for men, pink for women) and neighbors standing in parallel lines to exchange rice and prayers; the seamstresses in the market next door pumping sewing machine pedals in their mattress-sized shops. Finally, I step outside and feel it. Pounding rain or glaring sun, always accompanied by stultifying humidity and the wonder of how lucky I am to live in Yangon, Myanmar, a place of frenetic and complex political, economic, and social change.

I chose to make a home in Miminaing because it seemed quiet and green. I learned later that the neighborhood was built as a public housing complex, but not in the way I had imagined. Sandwiched between the national theater and Yangon General Hospital, perched just above downtown, it was a place for high-ranking civil servants to secure long-term leases. When I timidly introduced myself in Myanmar to another Building 16 resident, the elderly man stared at me for 10 seconds and then in perfect English said, “Yes, yes, come in, come in.” Under an oil painting of his younger self, he told me how he lived and trained on an army base in the U.S. as a young general. (Until just recently, “civil servant” and “junta member” were nearly synonymous.) When I wake up at the designated time to pump water into the apartment (6:00–7:00 a.m.), I wonder who else is watching their overflow pipes at the same moment. What are their stories?

At the end of October, the Luce Scholars gathered in Thailand for early assessment meetings. Going into my individual meeting, I felt a little hangdog. I was still finding my place at the office and had only begun to develop the blurriest understanding of the Myanmar justice system. I could barely hold onto the beguiling Myanmar alphabet, and on bad days, I felt almost preverbal. (Case in point: I noticed a tent set up near my house with a homemade signboard the month before. I snapped a photo, went to a coffee shop, and laboriously translated what I thought was a birthday party announcement for a 70-year-old man. When I showed it to my language teacher, self-satisfied, she let me know it was actually a funeral observance. Good thing I didn’t show up with a present.)

At the meeting, I was reminded that the bulk of my Luce experience was still ahead and that the struggle to understand was the essence of the Luce year: My cohort thrilled me with their observations on life in such different corners of Asia, and we had long, cathartic conversations on the challenges and rewards of trying to responsibly work and learn as conspicuous Westerners in our respective environs. I returned to Yangon re-energized, and I have spent the last few months patiently building trust and watching my personal and professional efforts grow.

Before this year, I had traveled overseas, but always in brief spurts and never long enough to settle in. I would delay going to health check-ups or investing in a home or beginning to learn a language since a return home was just around the corner. One of my motivations for applying to the Luce Scholars Program, I told others, was to “not be able to make excuses for not knowing things.” Now, at the halfway point, that oft-repeated aspiration has been inverted: not knowing needs no excuse. The unknown is an integral part of my Luce year, even as I learn to read Myanmar’s rich tapestry.

JENNY PAYNE
LIVING IN Nishinomiya/Osaka, Japan
PLACED AT School of Human Welfare Studies Kwansei Gakuin University & The Center for Health and Rights of Migrants

I have the curse of being a morning person, which has forced me to develop a talent for locating the earliest-open coffee shop nearest my home in every city I’ve lived in. It was this uncharmingly practical need that brought me to a kissaten at 7:00 a.m. one block away from my language school dorm on my second day in Kobe, completely unaware that I was about to enter my true language school and my real home in Japan.

The same customers tend to cycle in and out of the kissaten every morning, and as these regulars are rarely ner-
vous-looking, white twentysomethings, I was the immediate
target of the friendliness and curiosity that people in the Kansai
region are known for. The owner approached me and asked
my order, my hometown, and my field of study. The first two
answers were straightforward, but I had to consult my dic-
tionary app to answer the last one. It suggested that “mental
health” be conveyed in katakana, the alphabet used for words
taken from foreign languages, or more technically as seishin-
hoken, a combination of the characters for “energy,” “spirit,”
“protect,” and “health.”

Beyond linguistic ignorance, that last question has always
been difficult for me to answer, as I have never fully known
what I wanted to study. I entered college hoping to become an
interpreter and graduated a neuroscientist. Yet the breadth of
my passions has never made more sense to me than over the
past several months, as I decorate the walls of my apartment
with kanji, participate in two language exchange groups, and
watch a few too many hours of Japanese dating shows, all for
the purpose of better understanding people. Perhaps even
more than my research and fieldwork, my language study has
provided the best training for the work I hope to do in the
future. The patience, humility, and openness necessary to learn
and communicate in another language are also the fundamen-
tal skills of any mental health professional.

I was warned that, with its reputation as a somewhat insular
society, Japan is not the easiest place to gain an understanding
of people. However, my experiences over the past six months
have, more often than not, refuted this stereotype, from hear-
ing my professors at Kwansei Gakuin openly criticize social
support for working mothers to listening to clients with HIV/
AIDS describe their experiences navigating the health care
system in my fieldwork at the Center for the Health and Rights
of Migrants. My mentors have brought me into the extensive
network of advocacy groups in the Kansai region, such that
any given day might find me at a lecture on LGBTQ health
care in Kyoto or at a workshop at a domestic violence shelter
in Osaka. The personal nature of these conversations about
health care and social welfare makes the ability to communi-
cate effectively in Japanese all the more necessary.

Yet almost all of my Japanese language skills have developed
not from the case reports and research papers I write at my
placements but through my conversations with people. The
owner of the kissaten now watches that nervous Californian
who didn’t even know the word for her own field of study
enthusiastically compare the Japanese and American health
care systems with other customers. And every day, I am grate-
ful for the few extra seconds of dictionary-searching that so
many new friends have offered me. The process of getting
to know someone with such shared intentionality is a rare,
derunderappreciated gift, relevant to me as both a mental health
professional and a foreigner looking for my 7:00 a.m. coffee.

REBECCA PETERS
LIVING IN Kunming, China
PLACED AT Asian International Rivers Center
Yunnan University

U ntil the start of my Luce experience, my life consisted
of predictable, if not expeditious, steps from undergrad-
uate to postgraduate study. When China was proposed as a
prospective placement country, it seemed too large to com-
prehend, and the Mandarin language too daunting to attempt,
the country’s cultural norms too impenetrable to my Western
sensibilities. The improvisation that this move would require
was outside of my measured trajectory. Encouraging me to
keep an open mind about upending my life to adapt to China, a friend sent me a line from Confucius’ Analects: 欲速则不达; or, “To reach your destination faster, go slow.” Deciding to spend my Luce year seeking to understand how Chinese and American scientists can work together on transboundary river research at the Asian International Rivers Center (AIRC) at Yunnan University, I dove in.

After visiting over twenty towns across eight provinces and calling two different cities home, my concern has abated. My language training program in Guilin, Guangxi Province, prepared me well for the leisurely pace of life in southwestern China. Everyday interactions affirmed my sense for the role of local values in daily life and an appreciation for the national obsession with food. Guilin’s excellent public bus system facilitated my new hobbies such as traditional calligraphy classes and classical Chinese musical instruments. People offered friendly encouragement to my efforts to stumble through Mandarin in casual conversations. Formerly impossible tasks like sending mail started to come with ease.

A “medium”-sized city of seven million souls, Kunming became my new home when I began my placement in late August. I aimed to focus less specifically on water issues and more broadly on culture to discern how high-level priorities for environmental policy coalesce or diverge from the opinions of everyday people. My initial hesitation transformed into eagerness to explore every aspect of life in the Middle Kingdom. Hiking around Xishan with new friends made through co-organizing a local chapter of a China-wide sustainability club, catching my breath at the soaring altitudes of Diqing while participating in a three-day rice harvest, and attending conferences with my colleagues in Nanjing all deepened my appreciation of the mutual enchantment as well as a constant undercurrent of tension between the US and China. Taking time to observe the encounters and happenings around me made me realize that, while China operates according to deeply established principles that seem simultaneously coherent and confusing to me, Chinese people are moved by profound forces that Americans can appreciate: concern for family and community values.

During the rest of my Luce year, I will seek to gain a deeper perspective on how people across generations and social classes view China’s place in the world. Going slow has heightened my awareness of the intangible scales linking China’s local histories, regional relationships and global ambitions. As China is both hyped and vilified in Western media, I am grateful to experience the poignant vignettes of everyday life, often rendered invisible by dominant narratives of a “rising China,” and the many ways in which Chinese people fight courageously to influence the trajectory of environmental policy and national development.

Rather than an intermission, the Luce experience and community of Luce Scholars have enriched the path of my life and elevated the habits of my work. I am not sure what my own destination is, but the opportunity to slow down has made an enduring impact on how I interpret the intertwined pasts and destinies of the US and China, and helped me develop the patience and persistence needed to become an effective leader in my field.

ANNIE PEYTON
LIVING IN Bangkok, Thailand
PLACED AT Landprocess Landscape Architecture & Urban Design

Before moving to Bangkok, opinions I heard about the city seemed to fall into two distinct groups: enthusiasm (from former residents, including Luce alumni) and dislike (mostly from people who had only been as visitors, Thai and foreign alike). I was curious, then, to experience this divisive urbanism for myself. Evolving from visitor to resident over the past several months, I’ve grown to appreciate Bangkok as I discover and learn more about this sprawling megacity.

As a public-space enthusiast, I’m thrilled that Lumpini Park, one of my favorite spots in the city, is near my apartment and has become part of my daily routine. Morning runs and walks during my commute offer many views of public life in the
park, which is filled with runners at dawn and dusk (the park nearly empties in the mid-day heat), dozens of Tai Chi groups, and high-BPM, dance-music-driven, free fitness classes (even at 6 a.m.!). If judged solely by this park, Thais are the fittest people I’ve encountered. True to Thai culture, though, there’s also food nearby: breakfast ramen and fruit stalls inside the park and street food lining the borders. For a wallet-breaking $1 annual fee, I joined a gym in the park where I swim laps and practice my Thai with old ladies in the pool. (Fortunately, even basic language skill seems to garner a response of “Geng maak!” or “Good job!”) Even close to home, the opportunities to observe public space and public life in Bangkok are everywhere.

Across the city, the area around my office offers another portrait of Bangkok urbanism: streets so narrow and full of street food, cars, and motos that my co-workers frequently pull me towards the side of the street and admonish my cavalier, pedestrian-first attitude. Although this neighborhood was clearly not designed with pedestrians in mind, I still enjoy being surrounded by the energy, sights, sounds, and smells of this dense neighborhood each day.

Several projects at my placement organization, Landprocess Landscape Architecture & Urban Design, focus on public space in Bangkok through the lens of landscape architecture. Visiting projects with colleagues who helped design the spaces—and also dealt with project politics—has been educational from both design and cultural standpoints. For instance, a Thai row-house neighborhood was stripped of several buildings and facades to create a contemporary outdoor space that merged, down to the details, traditional and modern forms. Conversations with colleagues and design themes at work have made me think more about the ways that cultural values influence built form, and how this plays out in both large-scale urbanism and individual spaces in Thailand.

Thanks to my boss, I had the opportunity to gain teaching experience during my Luce year. Alongside her, I co-taught a landscape architecture studio and joined an undergraduate thesis review committee. It’s been interesting both personally and professionally to see design education in a new cultural context, noting what is similar to my experience and what is not, and comparing observed pedagogies between the two Thai programs.

My observations of urbanism in Bangkok, normally a rather quiet activity, found an unexpectedly social outlet when I joined an urban sketching club—the Bangkok Sketchers, an active group that hosts day-long sketching events around the city. Thai (and one American) sketchers young and old, hobbyist and professional, perch on sidewalks with small sketchbooks and watercolor sets. Recently, the group hosted 2016’s Asia-wide annual sketch conference where members of urban sketching clubs from around the continent visited Bangkok for a weekend of observing, sketching, lectures, and comparing notes on tools and techniques. Sketching is a tool for observing the city, and this activity benefits my public space interest and provides a way to document my Luce year—in addition to meeting friendly (and very talented) Thais.

There’s much more ground to cover in exploring Bangkok—more than six months can fit—so I’ll hop to it and moto, skytrain, metro, and canal-boat my way around town, watching and learning wherever I go.

ROBERT ROGERS
LIVING IN Hanoi, Vietnam
PLACED AT Development and Policies Research Center

My fifteen-minute walk to work each morning in Hanoi, Vietnam is jam-packed with sights, smells, and impressions. I see a Buddhist pagoda sandwiched on either side by a French colonial church and a shining Gucci retail store. I see stands on the street corner selling flowers, bánh rán (Vietnamese fried rice donuts), and an assortment of fruits that I still do not fully recognize after six months. However, this delightful sensory overload is also accompanied by more somber impressions. As I walk past the district hospital, I see an older man on a makeshift wheelchair, left behind by a city bursting at its seams with motorbikes and lacking any infrastructure for
disabled people. I see a street vendor harassed by the police because her way of life has recently been declared a public nuisance by the government.

And so daily life steamrolls forward in “the city that never sleeps in,” in a country whose rapid economic growth has quickly propelled it to lower-middle income status, but has also created and augmented systemic issues and inequalities. In a broad sense, my role at the Development and Policies Research Center (DEPOCEN) has been to understand these problems and inequities, and to evaluate the efforts of the Vietnamese government and international actors to alleviate them. Our work examines programs as varied as community health centers, microfinance initiatives, and gender equality campaigns, and has taught me much about the unique development context of Vietnam.

One of my more significant tasks has been to help with the transition of DEPOCEN’s work from contract-based impact analysis projects toward self-directed, externally-funded research. For example, we recently won a grant from the Bloomberg Initiative to study the economic impacts of Vietnam’s new ban on smoking in public places. The wider hope of this transition is to help foster an independent Vietnamese research culture in Hanoi, where most universities and research centers lie under the umbrella of the single-party state.

Alongside my projects with DEPOCEN, I continue to work toward learning conversational Vietnamese. This has proven to be quite challenging, but I progress slowly with the help of Vietnamese friends, colleagues, and the wonderful host family I lived with for two months last summer. At any rate, the ability to express things like “My motorbike is broken, and I am 100 miles from the nearest city—please help!” has added undeniable value to my experience here. Outside of work and my comical mispronunciation of the six tones of Tiếng Việt, I spend most of my time stoking my passion for Phở bò tái chín (mixed beef Pho), Bia Hơi Hà Nội (Hanoian “fresh beer”), and the mountains and highlands of Central and Northern Vietnam.

My fifteen minutes of dodging motorcycles, buses, and buckets of water each morning give me time to ponder the challenges and advantages facing this dynamic, rapidly changing, and beautiful country, as well as my role as an outsider in this context. I look forward to six more months of reflecting, building relationships, and drinking 25-cent beers on tiny plastic stools as I appreciate the truly unique Luce-year experience.

REBECCA SCHECTMAN
LIVING IN Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
PLACED AT Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) - Malaysia

One of the most common words in Bahasa Melayu is boleh, which means “can.” Whether ordering snacks at mamak shops or responding to my supervisor at work, I find myself saying “can” a lot and hoping for the best. It’s one of those phrases that’s both used in English and Bahasa Melayu—either language can work. And I’ve started to use this word more and more as I feel increasingly comfortable doing a lot of things I’ve never done before. I’ve been attending a pottery class and can now make pieces without constant assistance from the guiding hands of my teacher. After working at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Malaysia (UNHCR) for the past four months, I am able to speak with refugees about their concerns in a mixture of Bahasa Melayu, English, and hand gestures. I also feel confident navigating Kuala Lumpur using a combination of public transportation and Uber and Grab (Southeast Asia’s popular transportation app).

One of the best parts about getting around Kuala Lumpur is getting to know Uber and Grab drivers. They have become my conversation partners as I pick up more Bahasa Melayu and have given me different perspectives on living in this sprawling city. It’s really the best situation in which to practice speaking: there’s no pressure to be grammatically correct and only a short amount of time to talk about whatever is on my mind. Yesterday, an Uber driver picked me up at the UNHCR and asked if I worked there. I said yes, and he said, “Ahhh. You’re dealing with humans every day.” He told me that he started

Rob and colleagues at an economics conference in Danang, Vietnam
I have been doing for the past few months: listening to refugees and asylum-seekers in Malaysia and tending to their protection needs, even though in some cases, all we can do is lend an attentive ear.

While work is challenging, my colleagues and friends from outside of work form a strong support community. They have invited me into their homes, woken up early to go on weekend hikes, and found cool bands to check out around the city. I’ve attended numerous weddings where I’m one of up to a thousand guests—Malaysia does celebrations just like it does malls: BIG. And if there’s a celebration, that means there’s copious amounts of delicious Malaysian food. People here love to feed others, and when I’m given a new dish to try, I’ve learned that the best answer is always “boleh.”

EVAN SILVER
LIVING IN  Bali, Indonesia
PLACED AT  Artist-in-Residence Program at Rumah Sanur

As I reach the summit, the stars wrap themselves in indigo blankets, and a cosmic cocktail of pinks, blues, purples, greens, and a splash of grenadine pour into the sky. I look out, and all around me the landscape billows out until it spills into the sea. From the peak of Mount Agung, the highest point in Bali, I have a 360-degree view of everything. Over there, just beyond that forest, I watched men and women in all their red and golden finery dance for six hours in the pounding rain. There, somewhere among the rice fields, my teacher blessed a small child with incense, flowers, and holy water in the same stroke that he blessed the buffalo-skin journeymen of a midnight shadow play. And there, across the water, are the mountain peaks I have yet to reach.

The days hold innumerable mysteries, challenges, and discoveries, which simmer into a thick, savory curry. I swim through textured batik fabrics and fall in love with the same chocolates and indigos over and over again. The songs and invocations, the melodic ringing of the gamelan, the trills of geckos and the early morning cockerels reverberate through my head like fireballs flung at a kecak performance. The hardwood masks whose eyes move suddenly and unassuredly, the jeweled hands which mix invisible honey in the air; and the puppets made of mirrors whose reflections shine godlike and ghostly: these images are now seared into my consciousness.

The year has unfolded in a series of chapters. In Jogjakarta, I studied Bahasa Indonesia, the national language, while getting to know the city and its culture. I studied traditional batik painting and took Indonesian cooking classes with fellow Indonesia-based Luce Scholar and star friend Mohammad Zia. Since arriving in Bali, I have studied the tari topeng (masked dance), wayang kulit (shadow puppetry), and gender (an instrument
in the traditional Indonesian gamelan orchestra) with three wonderful, highly-skilled artists—I Gusti Ngurah Windia, I Gusti Ngurah Artawan, and I Wayan Wija—who have also become my friends and family here. I have attended countless performances and ceremonies, and been endlessly moved, confused, and inspired. Next, I plan to learn how to carve masks and build puppets from scratch.

I’ve also had the good fortune of becoming involved with an international collaboration in contemporary theatre between Bumi Purnati Indonesia, a pan-Indonesian arts organization, and the world-renowned Suzuki Company of Toga, Japan. The project is a version of the story of Dionysus, adapted and directed by Tadashi Suzuki, whose practical and philosophical writings on theatre have been very inspiring to me. Through my involvement, I have been able to gain a more intimate understanding of Suzuki’s rigorous and comprehensive process. I hope to continue working on the project in Japan this April.

My time in Indonesia has brought a host of unexpected wonders. Half-naked dancers caked in the muddy riverbanks of the Jakartan forest. Blue fire flickering from within the smoke at Ijen Crater. Ice sculptures in tropical weather. Temples that defy the rules of time and space. Bulls that emerge from the worn pages of a mythological manuscript. Motorcycle rides through rice fields and blackened fish between my fingers. Dirt and sand and water and coffee. And, of course, art. Art that is so deeply woven into the fabric of life that it seems as necessary and life-sustaining as food and water.

Looking forward, I plan to devise and direct a large-scale theatrical project as the culmination of my artist residencies at Rumah Sanur Creative Hub and the Bali Purnati Center for the Arts, drawing inspiration from all the sounds, sights, and flavors of my time in Indonesia. I will likely work from folkloric or mythological sources in the gorgeous outdoor amphitheater at Bali Purnati, collaborating with Indonesian actors and designers. I will draw lessons from traditional forms to produce a new, contemporary work. We may play with fire, masks, puppets, dance. We may get our hands muddied along the way. Of course, we can imagine all we like, but we won’t know what the full view looks like until we’ve reached the peak.

NATHAN TRUONG
LIVING IN Taipei, Taiwan
PLACED AT Science Education Center
National Taiwan Normal University

An island gateway to East and Southeast Asia, Taiwan has often been described as an intersection of multiple histories. My time here has rendered that characterization quite insufficient in capturing how dynamic life is in Taiwan. I have come to see my experience here as a door into an incredibly diverse Taiwanese identity, landscape, and culture, with roots in multiple countries, that coexist in an always-exciting form. I experience this diversity in the smallest of moments as much as I do when learning about the history and current events of Taiwan. Each day in Taipei, the capital, I can hop on the public bus and pass by streams of pedestrians and motorbikes, cruise on the extensive MRT subway system, or take to the streets on foot or a convenient public YouBike. Each path offers a glimpse into a city filled with fragrant food shops against the backdrop of apartment buildings, expansive greenery, riverside parks, hills, and mountains. The island’s diverse beauty is even more apparent while travelling along the rice fields of Taitung County, the pristine coastlines of Hualien, and the charming streets of Taichung and Tainan.

Learning about Taiwan’s evolving identity offers a glimpse into the intersection of many influences, starting from a native aboriginal population, punctuated by waves of immigration and colonization by Han Chinese, Spanish, Dutch, Japanese, and more recently, foreign workers and students, all folded into Taiwan’s population and identity. Such complexity manifests in countless small ways. Through food, I can eat dan bing (egg crepe) for breakfast, Hakka noodles for lunch, Shanghainese dumplings for dinner, and end at a night market filled with a variety of local and regional snacks. As a Vietnamese-American, some Taiwanese traditions such as festivities centered around the lunar calendar feel familiar, but remnants of culture derived from lands I have never been to make life new and exciting on a daily basis.
I find this diversity and history particularly relevant in my work as a researcher at National Taiwan Normal University’s Science Education Center and while learning about the Taiwanese education system. I research the intersection of science education and science communication, elucidating the overlap between two fields that have broadly similar goals but largely distinct histories of development. I work to improve science education tools such as a cloud-based classroom platform developed by my research lab, and I spend time at the National Taiwan Science Education Center providing input on science exhibitions for the broad public. My time working in science and education in Taiwan has given me numerous opportunities to observe schools, meet with teachers and professors, and understand Taiwan’s education system through the lens of historical and cultural development. The system consistently performs well on an international scale, owing in part to an emphasis on the cultivation of high performance, as well as a broad cultural investment in education, manifested in high levels of respect for academic success and education professionals.

I cannot believe six months in Taiwan have already passed. Over the next six, I hope to develop my Chinese, explore Taiwan’s beautiful mountains and scenery, continue to fail at surfing, eat my way through a cuisine that never tires, and constantly immerse myself in interactions with the Taiwanese people and the education system. Each passing day, I feel more strongly that Taiwan is truly an extra special place at the intersection of familiar beauty and new delights that always offer adventure.

Jennifer Tu
Living in Taipei, Taiwan
Placed at Institute of Epidemiology and Preventative Medicine, National Taiwan Normal University

“In most departments, patients undress so doctors can examine their bodies. Our patients go beyond that; they open their hearts to us, so we can examine every facet of their lives.”

Dr. Tzung-Jeng Hwang, my mentor in geriatric psychiatry at National Taiwan University Hospital (NTUH) this year, is an expert in dementia and schizophrenia. He took the time to say these words to me, but it is through his actions, as well as those of Dr. Jen-Hau Chen, my mentor in geriatric and internal medicine, that I have come to appreciate a great privilege: the trust of strangers. Observing Dr. Hwang and Dr. Chen at NTUH, I have had the opportunity to see all sorts of people. Their individual narratives have given me surprising insights about Taiwanese culture, and they have shaped my plans with my research mentor, Prof. Karen Chen, at the School of Public Health. They have been a unique, irreplaceable part of this year.

Taiwanese culture is in the midst of rapid change, and there’s no better way to stay updated than by observing the people. For instance, arriving in Taiwan in June, I was curious and excited to learn about the competition and complex interactions between traditional Chinese medicine, Western biomedicine, and shamanism, which I had read about in Arthur Kleinman’s book from the 1980s, *Patients and Healers*. Little did I know that with the introduction of National Health Insurance in 1995, preferences have noticeably shifted. Now, most people in Taiwan visit hospitals and clinics practicing Western medicine.
Nothing could have made this clearer to me than a recent case in Dr. Hwang’s psychiatry office. A woman came in, seemingly calm, but grew restless by the minute, eventually leaping out of her chair and pacing around the small space. It turned out that she not only had anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder, but also religious delusions and auditory hallucinations—she began to talk as if she were possessed by a spirit during her patient interview. To make things even more interesting, she was brought in by her elderly father who was actually a retired shaman. At Dr. Hwang’s recommendation, he agreed to hospitalize her. A shaman seeking out healing for his own “possessed” daughter at a psychiatry clinic—the puzzle lingered in my mind for a long time.

Staying abreast of cultural changes can be challenging, but keeping up with current research has been equally difficult. That’s why I’ve changed my research topic twice in the four months I’ve been in Prof. Chen’s Lab of Geriatric and Genomic Epidemiology Research. At first, it was a meta-analysis of quality of life (QOL) for dementia patients. Then, after realizing that had already been done, I switched to a systematic review of religion and dementia. But a couple weeks into that topic, I was surprised to find a study published just last year. It was thus, with an open (or should I say empty) mind, that I flew to Singapore to attend the Duke-NUS Centenarians Conference (shout-out to my Luce sister Elizabeth Linton for organizing it!). Returning to Taipei just in time for the International Psychogeriatric Association Asian Regional Meeting in Taipei (which I helped Dr. Hwang organize), I was able to make a list of research gaps from both conferences.

In order to choose one of these topics to focus on, I looked to Dr. Chen’s geriatric patients. There was one common theme: almost every one of them lived with and was brought in by his or her grown children. Most elderly Taiwanese remain passive, and their family speaks and makes medical decisions for them. It is very normal for patients not to come into the clinic at all, instead having their children report their active symptoms to Dr. Chen. We’ve seen countless sons and daughters, clearly burnt out, confused, or overwhelmed by the task of caring for a parent with dementia. They were the ones who drove me to settle on my current research topic. Now, I am trying out a narrative review of QOL and the burden of family caregivers of dementia patients.

Patients and family members can tell from my short white coat that I’m a student, but they probably don’t realize just how much I’m learning from them. The insights and relationships I’ve built outside the hospital, whether shaking and doing Tai Chi with elderly in the park, going on tangents with my Chinese and Taiwanese tutors, singing with church friends in Taipei, or visiting other towns and countries with fellow Luce Scholars, all seem to connect with lessons from work, too. I look forward to six more months of strengthening connections, seeking out adventure, and never taking open hearts for granted.

MOHAMMAD ZIA
LIVING IN Jakarta & Bali, Indonesia
PLACED AT Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources

Rushing past a crowd of tourists, Evan (my fellow Luce Scholar in Indonesia) and I walked briskly towards the steps. It was around five in the morning, and I was eager to reach the top. A moment of undisturbed reflection was going to be worth the trouble of getting ahead. We made our way to the front of the crowd and continued walking up the steps. A bright white light helped us navigate the path toward the top of Borobudur temple. After climbing the last set of stairs, Evan and I went in different directions to find a completely empty space. The adhan—the Islamic call to prayer—echoed across the hills, and the mist of morning clouds dotted the skyline.
The adhan ushered in a beautiful morning as I stood on top of the world’s largest Buddhist temple in the world’s largest Muslim-majority nation. Words can’t do justice to that moment.

Indonesia, the world’s fourth most populous country, is home to many religions, ethnicities, languages, and cultures. Dubbed the Improbable Nation, Indonesia has defied the odds and progressed toward greater economic development and a still fragile democratic system since its independence over 70 years ago. Over the past few months, I have had the opportunity to explore a tiny fraction of Indonesia’s cultural diversity and learn more about one major component of its vibrant and promising economy: the energy sector.

I arrived in Indonesia hoping to work with the Center of Excellence on Clean Energy, a project sponsored by the Indonesian Ministry of Energy to cultivate the nation’s renewable energy potential. Indonesia is home to 40% of the world’s geothermal energy potential and is blessed with high rates of solar irradiance along with strong winds across its shores. These dynamics make it a prime location for renewable energy investment, but the sector has yet to reach its potential.

As part of my Luce-year experience, I witnessed, firsthand, the trials and tribulations of renewable energy development in a fossil-fuel-dependent economy. Within one month of my arrival in Indonesia, the minister of energy was ousted, and three weeks later, his replacement was also ousted. In light of these political transitions, the ministry’s renewable energy projects were being restructured just weeks before my placement was going to start. Over a WhatsApp message and an ensuing phone call, I found out that the Center of Excellence on Clean Energy was going to be dissolved, and along with it, my Luce placement in Jakarta.

The Ministry of Energy’s Jakarta office helped facilitate a new placement for me with a smaller scale project based in Bali. In October, I began working with Kawasan National Energi Bersih (KNEB). The Indonesian Ministry of Energy sponsored KNEB to increase renewable energy uptake in Bali and Eastern Indonesia. Working on a more localized scale has been the most rewarding aspect of my placement thus far in Bali. I am especially grateful for the opportunity to assist with site assessments that identify community needs to construct viable renewable energy solutions. I am looking forward to digging deeper into more site mapping trips and studies for solar and bioenergy projects across Bali during the second half of my placement with KNEB.