



Voices from the Field

No regrets: From being a Fulbright scholar in Taiwan to having taught for decades in Macau

Todd Sandel, interviewed by Casey Man Kong Lum

I recently had an inspiring conversation with Todd Sandel, a veteran Advisory Board member at the Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Professor at the University of Macau, about his decades of research and teaching experience in Asia. The following provides reflections on some of his experiences as an intercultural scholar and educator.

What brought you to Taiwan as a Fulbright Scholar in 2007-2008? Did your Fulbright experience play a role in your subsequent career development overseas and, if so, how, and why?

My interest in the Fulbright program was a next step in my scholarship and studies of “communication in context” in Taiwan. A few years prior to applying to the Fulbright program, when interviewing a participant in Taiwan, she told me that the large number of “foreign brides” coming to Taiwan was of concern to her. I then developed this topic for my Fulbright application, which led to a year-long stay in Taiwan with my family. It was not only a great topic to study (see Sandel, 2015; Sandel & Liang, 2010), but also a great way for my wife and three children to connect more deeply with Taiwan, the land where our two older children were born. All of us (except my Taiwanese wife) improved our language skills. I vividly recall one time taking my youngest daughter, four at the time, to a nearby convenience store in Taiwan. We were speaking to each other in Chinese. The woman working there asked me (in English) if my daughter could speak English.

My experience in Taiwan led me a few years later to leave my job at the University of Oklahoma and move to the University of Macau. This began in 2007 with a meeting of all Fulbrighters across Greater China at a seminar in Hong Kong. As part of the experience, we had the option of visiting Macau. I joined the tour, and found that, unlike Hong Kong, where most of the colonial era buildings were torn down and recognizable only through plaques, Macau had a distinctive Portuguese feel, marked by streets paved with black and white stones—Calçada—and impressive colonial-era buildings preserved within a UNESCO world heritage site. I also visited the University of Macau and was intrigued by the idea of living and working in Macau. A few years later I applied for a position there, and in 2012 began my career there. Hence, the Fulbright experience in Taiwan in 2007-2008 led me to envision a different path in life, namely living and working in Macau.



Macau's Senado Square – paved with Calçada

Please share with our readers a few of what you consider your most difficult challenges while teaching overseas (say, in Taiwan, Macau, etc.). How did you address these challenges? What have you learned from these experiences?

I can't say that I have faced any major challenges teaching in either Taiwan or Macau. In many ways, the experience of living and working in a university is similar, whether in the US or elsewhere. And in some ways, I prefer teaching in Asia, where students often show greater respect for their teachers than in the US. I'd say a major challenge is to learn how to navigate and adapt to a new system and decision-making structure, which in Macau can be "bureaucratic" and "top-down," and change quickly. But this can happen anywhere, as shown by what has been happening in the US since 2025.

In brief, I have learned is to appreciate what it means to be an academic who works in a university with great colleagues, and young people who never age (as I age). While I can and do complain about the job at times, I believe that I am privileged to be an academic and that I have the best job in the world.



Todd with undergraduate students, University of Macau

What have been some of your most gratifying experiences or outcomes teaching overseas the past few decades and why?

My most gratifying experiences come from advising and learning from my graduate students. At Macau I have supervised to completion 6 doctoral dissertations and 46 masters theses. While I cannot vividly recall all, some do come to mind as particularly meaningful, especially those that I supervised early on. This includes a thesis written by a masters student, Lois, (Xin Guan), who used the thesis as an opportunity to explore her own identity as a person born in the mainland, but then came to Macau to live and work as a student. This was a time when many in Macau talked about the “new immigrants” (*san ji man* in Cantonese) who moved to Macau from the mainland after the handover of control from Portugal to China in 1999 and, unlike earlier waves of immigrants, were “investors” who came because they had enough wealth to purchase houses and/or businesses. Through Lois I came to better understand not only the recent history of Macau, but also how the local people perceived their identity and relationship to newcomers. After working with her to revise the thesis, we published it in a paper (Guan & Sandel, 2015).

I had a similarly rewarding experience working with my first Ph.D. student, Jenny Bei Ju. She lived just across the border from Macau in the adjacent city of Zhuhai and commuted daily across the border separating the mainland from Macau. This border-crossing experience motivated her to explore others’ experiences, from the point of view of workers who came to Macau as cleaners and security personnel. This study resulted in publications from her dissertation (e.g., Ju & Sandel, 2019; 2020), and follow-up studies based upon the challenges experienced during COVID-19 (e.g., Ju Dai & Sandel, 2022; 2023).



Todd and doctoral students enjoying lunch

Other students who followed have likewise taught me not only to better understand Macau (e.g., Duque & Sandel, 2022; Ou & Sandel, 2021; Sandel & Qiu, 2020), but also other countries, such as Bhutan (Sandel & Wangchuk, 2020), and China's rich and fascinating digital culture (e.g., Cao & Sandel, 2026; Sandel & Wang, 2020; Yu, Sandel & Chan, 2025). Each of these studies means more to me than an academic publication—they signify a fruitful relationship with an intelligent, motivated, and creative student who has taught me far more than I could learn on my own.

Have you had any regrets in your overseas teaching experience and, if so, can you please reflect upon what or how you may have learned from them?

None.

Based on your decades-long experience, what advice would you give to colleagues in the field who aspire to teach overseas?

If you wish to experience life in another country, consider who you are and how willing you are to accept change. When you first move to another country, you will find that some parts of your life

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and work will feel familiar (e.g., working in a university, teaching classes, conducting research, and writing). But then some challenge arises, and the “script” that used to work for you, no longer applies (see Schuetz, 1944). During my first years at the University of Macau, I often compared what was happening at present with what I would do in the past. It took me some time to fully internalize that I was no longer in Oklahoma and that I had to accept and deal with the situation at hand. If you can accept this, then I encourage you to look “overseas.” If not, then you might not want to make such a move.

Image credits: T. Sandel

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