The NSF-sponsored opportunity I had to travel to Taiwan to attend the ICGPSRO was by all accounts a great success. I made valuable personal connections with other researchers and supplemented my knowledge on radio occultation and its applications, all while experiencing authentic Southeast Asian culture and lifestyle. Here I chronicle the experiences I had, both cultural and those related to research, though words do little justice to the full experience.

I arrived in Taiwan in the early evening along with several other U.S. students, although it felt like the middle of the night since I had barely slept in 42 hours. This feeling quickly changed as I became enthralled by the lights and sounds of Taiwan in what was my first authentic experience of a Southeast Asian country. I was flooded by unfamiliar sights; neon signs I was unable to read, the glowing sea of paper lanterns constructed to celebrate the Lunar New Year, and the rice fields, which I had never seen before. The rush of new experiences foreshadowed a week full of learning and exploring.

The next day brought another unfamiliar experience--jet lag. Sitting all morning and afternoon through student presentations presented a challenge, but one that was in part combatted by the interesting dialogue theses sessions provoked. As someone who works on ionospheric imaging and irregularities, listening to students talk about research related to RO and the ionosphere provided helpful perspective on the problems on which I am working. In addition, presentations on lower-atmosphere and climate expanded my appreciation for the value and impact of the RO technique and data.

Dessert dish called dòuhuā
The next few days provided opportunities to expound on our research discussions while also exploring local culture. At a Taiwanese street market we tried a dessert, pronounced dòuhuā, that was a delicious mix of tofu, jelly, pineapple, and sweet broth. The Taiwanese students called it the “Chinese equivalent of ice cream,” but it was a lot healthier than ice cream. Among other sites and activities, we also explored the NSPO. This opportunity deepened my appreciation for the physical infrastructure that goes into making a sophisticated satellite constellation like COSMIC-2. It also instilled a sense that the COSMIC data I work with is actually something very physical, in contrast to the abstract nature of working with it in a computer.

At the ICGPSRO conference afforded rare and helpful interactions with many more researchers and influential minds in RO. Among the most redeeming experiences this conference provided was the affirmation that my field of research involves more than just me and a bunch of anonymous papers. Talking with students other researchers, during the poster session and throughout the conference, boosted my motivation and confidence towards my own research. It has inspired me to work harder and learn more to prepare myself for better questions and deeper dialogue at the next conference I attend.

On the last night, Amy, one of the Taiwanese students, gifted each U.S. student a rice cake dessert she had made. While the cakes themselves were delicious, the greater gift to me was this token of the meaningful relationships we had formed with the Taiwanese students and researchers throughout our week together. The whole week had been a reminder that scientific research is an international endeavor. This perspective will be important to have in a world whose challenges and answers to these challenges are becoming increasingly global. Of course, the ICGPSRO also provided all the usual benefits I would expect from academic conferences--useful professional connections, discussion and headway on research problems, and opportunities to collaborate--but the fact that it all happened in a far-away place I had never been to before makes the motivations and experiences gained more powerful and resonant. I will be sure to carry them with me and to pay forward this great opportunity I have had.