

interim report Nanjing University

academic year 2023/24

Shortly before I started my journeys to China my father told me about a documentary about a student who went to the Namib dessert in Africa. When he was asked, what was most happy about, he answered not having planned too much. This is true both in Africa and in China. When I first arrived at Shanghai airport I was completely lost. I didn't speak Chinese, didn't have internet, money or another way of payment, since VISA is not accepted in China, and my phone was almost dead. So I was a bit afraid I'd not make it to my hostel. In the end a cab driver changed me some money and I took the metro, but till there it was a bumpy ride. So even though I was not prepared at all, I managed to survive.

But one shouldn't be completely unprepared. The most important thing to prepare is the visa. Getting the process started is a bit complicated, but once everything is rolling there shouldn't be any bigger problems. As a student of chemistry I had to check a box saying that I'm trained in handling chemical products, but this didn't lead to any problems in the process. I had to admit the application at one of five visa service centres in Germany, the closest to Freiburg being the one in Frankfurt. I got an appointment with the request to show up on time, otherwise I may not be served. When I was on my way to Frankfurt my train was delayed, so I was late as well. Not too much, but I was afraid that I wouldn't be served. But it turned out that there was no one waiting especially for me but rather everyone was forming a line and being processed in the order they arrived. This system of being told to be on time otherwise you could get in trouble is typical for Chinese bureaucracy. I ran in exactly the same situation twice in China where I was delayed and thought to be in trouble but in the end nobody cared and I just had to wait in line. This is just a way of managing the flow of people.

An other thing to prepare before coming to China is to install and set up a credit card in Alipay. It was the first thing I did after arriving at my hostel and I would recommend doing it before coming to China. Even at the airport no foreign credit card is accepted and the ticket machine for the metro doesn't take cash. WeChat on the other hand should be installed in China, since the western version doesn't have all the features of the Chinese one and requires a complicated verification process.

The living situation at Nanjing University is quite good. NJU has two major campuses, one in the inner city called Gulou Campus and Xianlin Campus in the outskirts of Nanjing. We were put in a dormitory in Xianlin Campus with most of the other exchange students. I share a room with another student from Freiburg. Even though it seems hard to share a room with someone completely strange without the chance of having some privacy, it's not as bad as it sounds. We are having lots of fun and the climate is good. Also you always have someone to go to the canteen with. Cooking in the dorm is possible but there only is a small kitchen on the ground floor which is shared with the whole house. Therefore most people eat in the canteen which is close and more than affordable. A full meal costs about two Euros. There is a big variety of shops where you can eat all sorts of good food, so it never gets boring. The only problem with our living situation is the fact that classes are not in Xianlin but in Gulou, which means that we have to take the metro every morning for 45 minutes in order to get to class. But one gets used to it.

I, as a student of chemistry who never professionally learned Chinese, was very afraid of not being able to talk to someone in Chinese. I was hoping that I could get around using English, but these hopes were shattered after my first day in Shanghai. But I survived traveling through China for two weeks without speaking more than twenty words Chinese which I learned from Duolingo. Nowadays the technology helps a lot to get around, so I never ran in any big trouble. I was concerned that I would

need Chinese skills to follow the class, but the Elementary(I) class starts at the most basic level of Chinese, so no knowledge is required to start. I would strongly advise to learn some phrases and words before coming to China, but it is possible to get around without it.

The language courses offered by the university are quite time-consuming, but manageable. The teachers are very friendly, help and respond on WeChat even late after class. The pace of the lessons is quite fast and the requirements between the different courses vary greatly and increase dramatically quickly. However, you don't have to be afraid of failing an exam, something that rarely happens in China. In addition to the language courses, other courses can also be taken. In the second semester, I enrolled in a course on Chinese history and culture, which I can warmly recommend.

On the whole, my experience in China was extremely positive. I met a lot of nice people, experienced a culture and language that is so foreign to my own, and had enough adventures to fill two books. But not everything was good. The biggest problem was that we exchange students were housed in a dormitory on the Xianlin campus, but our classes took place on the Gulou campus, an hour away. This meant that we showed up to class every morning at eight o'clock, completely sleepy. In the first semester I was able to cope with it quite well, but in the second semester I felt the effect quite strongly, I could no longer really concentrate on the lessons and the tiredness usually ruined the whole day. Another difficulty was the language barrier. Although this could be easily overcome with technical means, China is not yet really designed for non-Chinese speakers. Most apps are only available in Chinese and even in the university app I could only find my way around using the pictograms. But you can find your way around well once you get used to it, and even my parents, who cannot speak or read a word of Chinese, were able to find their way around well after five days of training.

But all of this is outshone by all the positive things I experienced in China. Be it the friendliness of the people who smile at you on the street or the convenience of digitalization in China. As a foreigner you often feel a little special and are often given special treatment. As an example, the university put tickets aside for international students for events that are difficult for the average Chinese student to get hold of. There are also many events on Chinese culture, where you can paint fans or make lanterns.

But even if my stay here wasn't perfect, it was an incredibly impressive time and I'm very glad I took the step. I would do it again at any time and can only warmly recommend that everyone embark on the adventure of a stay abroad in China. It is a unique experience and there is nothing comparable anywhere in the world. As said above, it is important not to panic and to be flexible. Chinese people are very friendly towards strangers and most problems can be solved with a smile and the explanation that your Chinese isn't good. Even though there are a lot of things to prepare and it might just seem that all the workload will crush you and there might be no light at the end of the tunnel it is definitely worth taking the. In any case, you should stay for a whole year, not just a semester. When we had to say goodbye to all those who had to leave after six months in the winter, there wasn't a single one of them who wouldn't have liked to stay here for another semester. Even a year isn't enough, but it's closer to the perfect period than six months.

I hope that my report has shed some light on the situation and inspired a little. Studying abroad is a unique, incredibly exciting and thrilling experience that I can only recommend to everyone. I would do it again at any time and hope that my path will lead me back here one day.



pagoda at the Purple Mountain



red maple trees at Qixia mountain



lantern at lantern festival



cherry blossom at 鸡鸣寺