

Zwischenbericht

M.Sc. Informatik

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Nanjing University

The time I spent so far in China has been one of the most rewarding experiences ever. I often tell my friends and family that all in all a lot feels a bit strange here, in both good and bad ways. After one semester, here is my take on how I got here and how it is like to live and study at Nanjing University.

Application and preparation

All in all I applied a bit late for the Global Exchange program and had some trouble getting a recommendation letter in the last weeks before applying. The application for Nanjing University was done by the international exchange department, so I only needed to provide my documents. It was a bit strange to find out that you actually do not need the foreigners health examination to apply (which can be expensive to do in Germany, doing it in China is cheaper and faster), but I heard for other universities as well as to apply for the CSC Scholarship you might need it. I luckily also managed to get the BW-Stipendium, and can recommend everyone to apply for it!

Arrival and first impression

I flew with three other german friends from Basel Airport to Shanghai. We directly went on the train to Nanjing, which was a bit too fast in hindsight. We arrived about a week before the official registration started, so weren't allowed into the dorms yet. At first we stayed at a pretty good hotel, but made the mistake that it was pretty far outside of the city and a 10 minute walk from the next subway station. The first days I had to rely on my friend to pay for a lot of things, because some places had no change for the bank notes I carried around. If you have time, add your credit card and connect it to both your WeChat and Alipay before arriving in China! It was also hard to find WiFi, as it often requires you to login with a Chinese phone number. I bought an eSim from Nomad (it's data only) and can recommend it to gap the time until you get a real SIM card.

I also think that arriving a bit earlier, before the registration time of the semester begins, makes a lot of the process easier and more relaxed. We did originally not plan to come in advance, but the semester begin was pushed back for a few days, in the end I think we were lucky with that.

Registration and first week at Nanjing University

My friends all received the China Study Council scholarship which allowed to stay in the dorm at the Gulou campus in the inner city, right next to the department of international language studies, where most of the Chinese course lessons take place. I had to wait until September fourth to get onto campus, but as it turned out later I could have already moved in the dorm at September 1. The people I met that moved in early had no prepared sets of mattresses and blankets though, which I got when moving in at the first possible day.

Registration was a bit tiring, but everyone was nice and helpful, except that the longest queue for visa was only necessary for the 2-semester students that already got their health examination done, which no one of us had.

The health examination is mandatory for everyone staying for more than one semester (and if you want to swim in Xianlin's public pool I heard), so a lot of people had trouble getting an appointment for it in the first two weeks. Do it before if possible!

The residence permit application was pretty troublesome for me, because I did it at a time everyone wanted to extend their visa or apply for a permit themselves. I went to the visa office one afternoon and had to come back the day after because there were too many people. All in all I waited five hours for five minutes at a desk! Only afterwards we were told there were actually three different offices where one could apply. So do this one also as early as possible!

The bureaucracy seems sometimes as bad as in Germany. For a hospital visit, opening a bank account and the residence permit you need to draw numbers, in banks you need a Chinese ID card for that (so you need a Chinese friend to help you out).

Getting SIM cards was easy, but try the shops next to a university campus first. After a few weeks did I find out that my China Mobile student contract is valid for 2 years, and that we pay about 60 rmb / 8€ per month for 30 GB of 5G, 50GB of 4G data, 500 mins of calling. This was way too much for me, on top of that 5G did not work on my Google phone, so you may want to get another prepaid plan instead of a fixed contract.

Food

Food is much cheaper than in Germany. In our whole dorm we only have two cooking plates and two microwaves, so nearly no one cooks for themselves. But the whole Xianlin Campus has twelve(!) canteens, with each of them having about ten shops, each of them offering a lot of different dishes. For me as a vegetarian I quickly found out, half through asking, translating and half through recommendations of a vegetarian eating friend, that the canteen closest to our dorm had about ten different vegetarian meals. They are often easy to spot as they are the cheapest options! A meal in the canteen will cost from 8 rmb for a fried rice with eggs to 30 for a self-picked 麻辣烫 or 香锅 (which are both tasty and good vegetarian options).

Eating outside will cost more, about 15 to 30 for entry dishes, 40-60 for high quality meat options.

We once went to an amazing vegetarian restaurant (千千素爱素食, only 10 min away from Xianlin campus by taxi or metro + bike), only paying 70 rmb for about 12 dishes for 8 persons! A much cheaper option (28 yuan) is the self-service menu of 素满香 which you can find one in every big city.

A lot of people I met did not like the canteen food and ordered 外卖, take-out food, that you can get delivered to one of the campus gates or in some cases directly to the international dorm if you order in advance in a special WeChat group where someone regularly brings the orders from the gates to the dorms. If you want coffee after your lunch, be sure to order early, otherwise you might have to choose between your coffee or arriving to class on time! I particularly liked Luckin Coffee (they are cheap) and a nice cosy cafe at the top of canteen 12.

Dormitory and Campus

Getting used to live in a room together with another person took a while, but I'm glad my roommate and I get along so well. Still, having some time alone in a cafe or the library helps to not sit around each other the whole day when we don't have class. The rooms themselves are really basic, but have air conditioning and a lot of space. Chinese students often have rooms of three or four people, and no common room or kitchen like the international dorm has.

In winter the dorms get really cold! I often woke up with about 12°C in my room when it was around freezing temperature outside. The air conditioning unit doesn't really help that much

because the rooms are pretty tall and not that well isolated (and uses a lot of power, which you pay for on your own).

Sadly they decided to close many facilities during the winter holiday (January 15th to end of February). The Gym and some of the table tennis / badminton courts stay open, but many of the canteens will be closed or have less meals than usual, and all in all much less people are around.

Xianlin is a great campus, and its huge! You need about 10-15 minutes by bike and walking to the metro station in front of the

Many student clubs meet weekly or more often in the gym or activity building. At the beginning of the semester, there was a large exhibition of all clubs at Gulou, where you can see everything from sports, music (guitar, piano, rock) to languages, calligraphy, video games and even one club dedicated to the book 红楼梦 (one Chinese classic).

My Experiences so far

The best experiences I had was when I could connect with local Chinese people. Luckily I took some Chinese classes in my bachelors, but before coming here I never spoke Chinese for that long with other people. The first time I felt not like an outlier in a wrong place was when I managed to speak to a cab driver for about ten minutes, wages, working hours, food prices and pension. He was about in his 30s and talked pretty openly, that he drove about 12 to 13 hours a day, but still did not make enough money to eat outside. I remember him saying that only government workers can expect to have a high-enough pension to live off it (about 3-5 thousand rmb) and that otherwise you would still have to work. This is probably one of the reasons you can see a lot of old people picking through trash, gathering cardboard or selling things like flowers, fruit or even working on construction sites. In one smaller city outside of Nanjing, I was told the local income was about 12 yuan per hour, so keep that in mind while buying coffee for the same price! Another cab driver said that local Chinese in Nanjing and Beijing are lazy, except housing they do not want anything, especially if like him they are part of the older generation who already managed to buy their own flat. Other students had complete opposite views, often talking about the 内卷, the struggle to get a good job and competition in modern society.

Many people that you just met will ask you somewhat personal questions like "Do you have a girl/boyfriend?", which is their way of smalltalk and building up a connection to you. This took some time to get used to, but also makes asking about some conditions (e.g. economy, how covid impacted peoples lives here) much easier. I think in Germany it would be considered rude to ask about a persons salary, here it is a common thing.

I entered into the local archery club which has a nice room in one of the big gyms, and they shoot there every evening from 6:30 to 9. You only pay a small fee per semester but it is totally worth it! I got to know a lot of people through that club. Sadly the also closed our room in the winter holidays, but some people set up their own targets to shoot outside.

All in all It still feels hard to really connect with students here and make friends, as we usually do not have classes together, and wanting to meet them sometimes feels like making a doctors appointment. Still, some people are interested in learning more about foreigners, practicing english or so, and if you try to come into contact with a lot of people you will definitely make a lot of acquaintances, some friends, and a lot of interesting experiences.