

Experience report

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In the following I would like to share an overview of my experiences with staying abroad at Tongji University in Shanghai, China

Preparation

Of course before I could go abroad I had to organize quite a few things. Due to the Pandemic situation I was very unsure where to go because I didn't want to get stuck in a foreign country or do my semester abroad online. Therefore I wanted to go to a country in the EU at first. However I wanted to be able to experience a culture I've never directly encountered before and I've been to many European countries already. Further the TUM outgoing team ensured me that I can push my semester abroad until it is possible to actually go in person. So I decided to be risky and choose Tongji University in Shanghai, China as my Host university. The application went fully over TUM SoM at first and after TUM accepted me for the exchange I had to make the same application once more on the university website of Tongji. It took a few months but eventually I got my acceptance confirmation. Unfortunately the communication from the Host university was very limited and I had to do a lot of research on my own about the stay abroad. During this time I also took a beginner's Chinese language course at the TUM language center to prepare myself for the exchange. If you plan to do a stay abroad and already know the destination I would suggest directly trying to get into one of the TUM language courses because unfortunately not enough of them are offered to fulfill the demand and most people do not get spots. I personally had to wait 3 semesters till I got a spot in a language course. My original exchange semester was in winter 2022 however the pandemic situation in China was still too bad to travel there and I had to push my exchange semester to spring 2023. Due to the uncertainty of the situation I couldn't do much planning in advance I got the notification that China opened its borders mid January, but the host university only confirmed in the beginning of February that we could come to China, that was two weeks from the start of the lectures in China. I only arrived in China in the middle of March because it took quite a bit of time to get an apartment, flight and a Visa so quickly. Therefore if you know when you can get to your host University try to plan these things as soon as possible.

Studies at Host University

At the host University the classes are split up between international and national students and you can only take courses within your own faculty, therefore meeting local students will be very unlikely unless you join external activities. You don't officially need a high Mandarin language level when you come to Shanghai but most people will not be able to speak English with you outside of campus. The selection of classes you can take is also very limited due to the language barrier, in my semester I could choose between 12 classes and 3 of them were language classes. The course ranking system in China is different and therefore every course only gave around 2 ECTS so it is unlikely that any of the courses can replace

part of your studies at tum. The courses were generally very easy and comparable to small weekend seminars at tum. Usually a course would have multiple grading elements like an exam, presentations, report etc. If you wish to transfer credits you should talk to your tum professors about this as early as possible because it can take quite long to get a reply. I took 4 classes in China but got the information in the middle of the semester that I can't transfer any of them. Similar things happened to some friends with host universities in other countries. The support of the host university was overall good. Once I got to China they replied to messages and told me what I have to do. However, they did not offer any extra support for extracurricular questions. When I first came to campus I wasn't informed about the security. For example, therefore I couldn't get into the campus at first. The whole campus is guarded with security and you cannot just go into campus like in Germany. You can only get in by scanning your student card, which you only get provided on campus. So on the first day you have to carry something like your acceptance letter with you in order to get into the campus at all. On the other hand, a very positive thing about the campus was the canteens and food options. The campus in Shanghai has 5 canteens with a lot of very fresh and affordable food options. A meal usually costs around 1 to 3 euros and is measured by weight. Some canteens had a food bar where you can select your food items while others had specific menus.

Accommodations abroad

I found my accommodation mostly by luck and talking to fellow exchange students. Important is that many accommodations are not on Google; you can often only contact them via WeChat. The university suggested us two places to apply to, one is the place I stayed at and the other was a luxury student living place close to campus. I paid around 500 Euro a month for my (very small) room. However, for Shanghai that was a good offer. In Shanghai, the living places are very limited and therefore very expensive. Furthermore, as a foreigner, you cannot just stay anywhere but you are only allowed to stay in places specifically made for foreigners. My apartment was in „1515“ at Jangpu road station, which was about 20 minutes away from campus but only a few minutes by bike.

Everyday life and leisure

My living costs in China were very similar to Germany just in other areas. You only had to pay a small fee for your campus card and otherwise there were no other studying costs. The food was a lot cheaper than in Germany, especially in restaurants or food deliveries, but the accommodation costs were the same or even higher than in Germany for most. Public transport inside Shanghai was pretty cheap but traveling around China got expensive very quickly. However, China is a very consume-driven society so you will most likely have to buy a lot of small stuff which you wouldn't really need in Germany.

The campus offered many clubs for free time activities, however, for most of the clubs you would have to speak Mandarin on a good level or have equipment. Aside from that, most sport clubs took place on the other Tongji campus which was bigger and around an hour away from Shanghai (basically the Tongue version of the Garching campus). In the City, the best option for doing sports was therefore a gym membership. Sometimes the university also offered events like the cherry blossom festival, however, due to the lockdown, the offers were very limited during my semester. Shanghai has many beautiful parks and as a big city, many free time offers. For finances, it is very important that you get a Chinese bank account which you can connect to Alipay and WeChat pay to be able to plan activities because many places only let you book tickets in advance over these payment services.

Additional costs / Funding possibilities (optional)

Unfortunately for me the timing of the exchange was a bit too spontaneous to apply for any financial aids but there are many scholarships for funding between Germany and China which offer support, but you have to apply at least a year before your exchange to be able to get them.

Competencies and learning experiences

I think that going abroad by yourself helps you grow immensely on a personal level. I am rather introverted so for me the semester was a big challenge and pretty stressful at the beginning but I learned so many new skills from it and made unforgettable experiences. It is different if you go to a country in Europe or America where the culture may be different but most people will understand you then going to a country where nobody speaks a language you know, you will not be able to have the internet access you are used to and the culture and political system are so different from back home. So many challenges at once can be very overwhelming at the start but after a few weeks you will learn to adapt and grow a lot from these challenges. My Mandarin language skills have unfortunately not improved to a high level but I definitely learned how to fend for myself without and means of external help.

Intercultural experiences

Before I came to China I was scared of their political system and control however as a foreigner as long as you don't offend the culture they mostly leave you out of their daily lives. Furthermore most Chinese people are rather nice and try to be helpful even through the language barrier. On the other hand I was also faced with a lot of nice and hateful racism. A lot of people tried to scam me and take advantage of my situations because I was a foreigner and on the other hand people would take pictures of me and follow me around shouting and talking to me because I am a foreigner. I would say generally you have to accept that most people will see you as more of a circus attraction than an actual person. This differs a lot depending on where you are, in the city center and living areas people will usually leave you alone but at parks or attractions you have to learn to get a very good pokerface or enjoy the celebrity treatment as best as you can. The technical advancement in China was also unimaginable for me before going there, everything is done digitally and rather quick and well. When I came back to Germany I had a hard time adapting to the slower pace of living again.

Other

Generally there are quite a lot of things I would have liked to know before my stay in China. For example an overview of VPNs that actually work in China for communications, a list of apps that you will definitely need in your daily life in China (Alipay, WeChat, Meituan, etc.) and a few more translations about the process of going to China. When you come to China you have to go to the nearest police office within 24 hours and register, once again these police officers are not able to speak English and the only way how you even find out about these requirements is because other students tell you and this lack of information could definitely be improved in my opinion.

Conclusion

To conclude my experience I can definitely say that my exchange was an experience that shaped me for life. I learned many new things about the Chinese everyday culture and unfortunately also more about the difficulties of living in a big metropolis during a pandemic. I believe that campus life would have probably been a lot more exciting if the timing of my stay would have been later and not directly after the corona lockdown. However I am still very happy that I dared to go and made all these new experiences and I think anyone considering a stay abroad should just go for it and try unless it is in the middle of a pandemic.