

Experience report

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Preparation

Planning, selection of the country and the Host University, organization, application to the home and host university, support from home university, language courses

My decision to study abroad was driven by my desire for an enriching and culturally distinct exchange semester. Southeast Asia has always interested me, especially its major cities. After evaluating several options, including Singapore, Japan, and Beijing, I settled on China. My choice was influenced by China's economic rise and rapid technological advancements. Among the Chinese cities, I chose Shanghai, not just for its reputation as an economic hub but also for the better air quality it offers compared to Beijing, which is primarily the political and cultural center of the country. Tongji University, with its good reputation and location in Shanghai, seemed the perfect fit.

As part of my preparatory steps, I gathered extensive information on necessary vaccinations, bank account setups, acquiring a phone number, mobile applications, and the visa registration process. Engaging with previous TUM attendees at Tongji provided valuable insights. The application procedure was straightforward; I was impressed by Tongji University's well-structured online portals and supportive coordinators. The only issue was choosing between the two different management tracks of Tongji offered during the exchange, as it wasn't immediately clear which was the best fit for me.

TUM provided me with a DAAD English proficiency certificate based solely on my Abiturzeugnis. My past experiences with cultural exchanges meant I didn't feel the need to attend TUM's intercultural seminars. To better assimilate, I took a Mandarin A1.1 course at TUM and supplemented it with self-study with a book by "Teach Yourself," which proved to be a valuable resource.

Studies at Host University

All my courses at Tongji University were conducted in English. The proficiency of the professors and my fellow students in English was good. The semester structure was similar to what I was used to, though there were some overlaps at the beginning due to my exam period back in Munich. Despite this, the online options available due to ongoing COVID-19 measures made it manageable. Additionally to the two

semesters optional summer schools are offered in the semester breaks. Tongji places a larger emphasis on hand ins and exams, if existing, only make up for a fraction of the final grade.

The overall academic rigor at Tongji was slightly lower compared to TUM. However, the course content was interesting, especially with its focus on China-specific subjects like “business law in China” and “digital innovation in China”. The management faculty, combined with the architectural and urban development reputation of Tongji, provided a comprehensive academic experience. In terms of support, I felt well-attended to by coordinators who were always ready to assist. There was a welcoming and information event, but no buddies, and no introduction week. Many Sino-German events are hosted at the university though where Germans get in contact well with other Chinese students

Accommodations abroad

Tips for finding accommodation (hostels / private housing market), help from Host University, costs.

The university’s accommodation primarily consisted of shared rooms with shared bathrooms and shared kitchens but is very cheap. It may be difficult to get a place though. I decided to stay at “1515 International Students Apartment,” which, despite being pricier (~450€) than other options, offered proximity to the university and a community of international students. Many of my fellow students lived there. As a group of international students, we often spent free time together. While some peers chose private apartments, I found my accommodation recommendable. I didn’t benefit from scholarships like Promos or DAAD, however there are no study fees attached to the exchange.

Everyday life and leisure

Cost of living, sports or language courses, student associations, integration into the university, regional and cultural offerings, information on public transport, quality of life.

Living in Shanghai was relatively cost-effective, with housing being the major expense. Still, overall, the expenses were lower than Munich. The commercial nature of life in Shanghai meant frequent minor expenses. The university’s sports facilities were impressive, with courts for basketball, soccer, badminton, and even a swimming pool. Socially, integration was smooth. I was consistently met with curiosity, warmth, and an eagerness to connect from the local students. The sino-german associations organized numerous events, enhancing the exchange experience. Shanghai’s vibrant cultural scene and efficient yet affordable public transport significantly contributed to a high quality of life, comparable to Munich.

Competencies and learning experiences

Growth in professional, social, linguistic, intercultural competence, etc., expected added-value to academic and career path.

During my time in Shanghai, my exposure to the Chinese economy was insightful and provided me with a unique perspective that I wouldn't have gained otherwise. This experience has improved my social competencies significantly. Interacting with fellow exchange students and local professors in a different cultural setting certainly enhances one's ability to communicate and collaborate in diverse environments.

From a linguistic perspective, my proficiency in Mandarin saw notable improvement. Engaging in daily interactions and navigating through day-to-day activities in Shanghai made me more fluent not just in Mandarin, but also in English.

Culturally, China's distinctiveness from Western nations is remarkable. By residing and studying in China, I could delve deep into its unique cultural nuances. On the academic front, while Tongji may not match up to TUM's academic rigor, the courses provided valuable insights, especially with their China-centric approach. Such an experience has broadened my career aspirations, making me consider roles in fields related to China in the future.

Intercultural experiences

Beliefs about the host country which turned out to be wrong or true; similarities/ differences between the culture of the host institution and yours; displeasing situations.

Before starting the exchange, my understanding of Chinese culture was somewhat clouded by preconceived notions. However, I discovered a culture that has grown largely independent of Western influences and found many of my beliefs validated. Characteristics like a collectivist societal view, disciplined approach, and a keen interest in Western cultures were prevailing. I was pleasantly surprised by the cultural depth and richness.

Interestingly, I found certain values like punctuality resonated with German culture. Many however were strongly different. The indirect nature of communication in China was a marked departure from the directness I was accustomed to in Germany. As a foreigner in China, the attention I garnered, especially in tourist-centric regions, was significant. But, on the whole, there weren't any significant displeasing incidents.

Intercultural Seminars at TUM before mobility

Did you join a seminar before mobility? If yes, was it helpful? In which cases did it help you at your stay abroad?

I did not partake in an intercultural seminar at TUM before my mobility.

Conclusion

e.g. best and worst experience

Reflecting on my time in Shanghai, the most enriching aspect was the deep dive into Chinese society. Exploring different cities, understanding the rapid economic development, and seeing China from an insider's lens was truly remarkable. The challenge, however, was the feeling of being an outsider in a land so different from home. But such experiences, both good and challenging, form the essence of an exchange program.