

Experience report

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Exchange semester: Fall semester

Academic year: 2013/2014

Host University: Shandong University

Country: China

TOPIC: Admission, arrival, housing

How was your arrival organized? Did someone pick you up from the airport/station? Was an orientation or introduction activity organized? How was accommodation organized? Does the university provide you with accommodation? What kind of accommodation does the university provide? Did you have to book your accommodation in advance or did you have to search for a place to live after you arrived?

I arrived in Jinan by train from Beijing. At the train station, students from Shandong University were waiting for me to pick me up. I was transported to University and after filling out some forms, I could go to my room in the students dorm. This is the accommodation provided by the university, on campus. I was in a single room, double rooms were also available. The single room was ok, everything was provided for, but not completely to Western standards. After a week or so, an orientation activity was organized, a presentation about life and activities at Shandong University. Also an activity to discover the different campuses was organized.

TOPIC: Location of university/city

Please describe the city you lived in. Where is the university located in the city? What is the best place to go to eat/drink/dance/do sports/etc.? What are interesting things to see and do in your host city? What was different than in Tilburg?

The city, Jinan, is a 'small' city of 7 million people. I always compared it as the Tilburg of China, not the biggest city, not the most beautiful city, but lots of stuff to do. The central campus, where I was, was located East of the City Centre. The campus was a beautiful, quiet place, but as soon as you got off campus, you knew you were in China. It is a great place to go out for dinner. Every small restaurant around campus is great, cheap and awesome food. Close to campus is also a gym, where I would spend a lot of hours per week. It is easy to get to the City Centre, take a bus from South Gate and you're there in 20 minutes. In the Centre, there are great shopping malls, a beautiful square that lights up every night and some springs that can be visited. There is also an amazing food street with the real Chinese food sold by vendors. The Damin Lake is close by as well, that is an enormous lake, a green oasis in a polluted city. About the pollution, there are a lot of days where it can be bad for your health. It is one of the most polluted cities in the world, but, for me, still an amazing city. To go out, there are a lot of clubs free accessible for foreigners. Chinese night life is amazing, especially for foreigners, free drinks and lots of attention of the Chinese. If you are looking for pubs or bars, that's difficult to find, since Chinese night life is solely focused on clubs. But, these clubs are great places to be in the weekend. There is a bar close to campus, next to the McDonalds, that's run by foreigners. During the day it is a restaurant with Pakistan and Indian food, three nights a week it is a bar where all the foreigners come together. Compared to Tilburg, first thing that comes to mind is the sheer size of the city, it is enormous compared to Tilburg. Next to that, it is Dutch culture compared to Chinese culture. It is an amazing difference, a real cultural shock. Everything is different, but amazing.

TOPIC: Academics

Which courses did you take and why? Which courses would you recommend? What did the courses add to your program at Tilburg University? How does the university compare to Tilburg University?

concerning the level of the courses, use of extra material, level of English, workload, etc.? Overall, were you happy with your academic achievements during your exchange? Please describe the campus of your host university.

I took six courses: Public Economics, International Financial Management, Ecological Economics, International Settlement, Law and Economics and Intermediate Macroeconomics. It was a nice variation in courses, some Economics, some more focused on Business Economics and a course combining Law and Economics. I hope, for next semesters to come, there are more courses available in English, because International Settlement was in Chinese and Law and Economics was half of the time in Chinese. And these were the only courses that were provided to me. The level of courses was way lower than in Tilburg. I think third year courses in Jinan were comparable to first year courses in Tilburg. So, most of the stuff I already knew, or was familiar with. This made the courses easy, but my focus more on how to live Chinese life and get to know my fellow students. There was also more a focus on presentations and assignment than in Tilburg, because classes were way smaller than they are in Tilburg. So, my academic achievements are not that high during my exchange, but still part of a great experience in China.

TOPIC: Social life

Which social activities organized by the university or students? Did you have contact with local students? Did you have contact with other exchange students? How did you get along with the local students and other exchange students? Did you travel to other places/countries during your exchange?

There weren't a lot of social activities organized by the university or students. Chinese students are 24/7 focused on their studies and work there asses of all week to get good grades at the end of the semester. We had a walk through Jinan in the beginning of the semester and an International Cultural Festival at the International dorm halfway through the semester. It was difficult to get in contact with the Chinese students, partly because of their workload and partly because they are a very shy and humble people. However, I made some good Chinese friends. Opposed to this, I had a great time with the other exchange students. We were a large, but very cohesive. I made some amazing new friends and learned to get to know a lot of cultures. It is interesting to go on an exchange, because there are people from all over the world in Jinan. A lot of Africans, Asians, Europeans, some Americans and a lot of Latin Americans.

TOPIC: Living costs

How did you finance your exchange period, apart from the grant you received from Tilburg University? What were your living expenses abroad like compared to Tilburg? What did you spend most of your money on? What would you advice future students to spend their money on? Please outline your approximate monthly budget whilst on exchange: housing, food, textbooks, etc.

I financed my exchange period with savings I made from working the whole summer. Next to that, my grant from the government (studiefinanciering) and my parents helped me to tie all the ends. But, my living expenses in China were a lot lower than in Tilburg. I did not cook for myself the whole semester, simply because eating outside was way cheaper. I could easily eat for 4 euros a day and eat tastefully and varied. Housing was about 150 euros a month, about half I pay in Tilburg. I went to Beijing for a couple of days and spent about 100 euros for 4 days, with meals. Textbooks are almost always freely available by email. All together I would spend about 300 euros per month, with going out every week and eating outside.

TOPIC: Culture

Did you experience culture shock while on exchange? How would you compare your host culture to your own culture? What did you learn about your own culture while on exchange? What was different about your host culture than you expected? What did you like and not like about your host culture? Do you feel you learned a lot about your host culture, and if not, what would you like to learn more? How would you describe your host countries culture? If you travelled to other cities/countries during your exchange, were they different than your host city/country, and how?

I definitely experienced a cultural shock on exchange. Especially the first couple of weeks, the shock was a bit difficult to cope with. In general, the Chinese don't understand me and I don't understand them. Also, the way of arranging things and work with each other posed difficulties. But, after a while and after I got to know several other students, the days were flashing by and everything was amazing for me. But, Chinese culture is in almost every way different than ours. Based on Buddhism and Confucianism, people are highly religious and there are temples and sacred places everywhere. Food is different, the way of eating food is different (off the streets, family-style), language is obviously different. People spitting on the floor, hygiene is not as much a factor in society as it is here. These are all things that you have to get used to. I was expecting differences and made myself the promise to embrace everything and fully open up to the Chinese culture. By living up to this promise, life was getting better and more easy. I learned about my Dutch or European culture that we are very lucky to live in such a high-standard society. We are way more developed and, in Holland, real poverty is not existing anymore. In China, it is. It is confronting to see poverty and know how life is at home. Life for students is also different, living standards are extremely low and work pressure is really high. Everybody in China is working to stay alive. In Holland, students are motivated to do a lot of stuff besides studying, and sometimes it looks like studying is second in line after extracurricular activities. In China it is different, studying is everything, grades are everything, students are the apples of the families eyes. For the culture, I loved to see so many differences with Dutch culture, but I wouldn't want to be a Chinese students, or have a Chinese youth in stead of the time I had at home. About what I learned, I learned a lot about the people and culture of China, but there is still so much to learn for me. I really want to go there for personal development and to travel more.

TOPIC: Personal development

What did you learn from the people you met during your exchange? Would you do things differently if you had the chance, and what would you do differently? What was your best experience, and what was your worst experience? What will you remember for ever about your exchange period? What was the most important lesson you learned about yourself during your exchange period?

I had the privilege to get to know people from all over the world. I learned so much about different cultures. I love to eat, so it was great to get to know everybody. The only thing I would do differently I guess, is try to travel more. Next to that, my experience was amazing. Maybe Jinan is not the most exotic or popular place to go to, it is a great international atmosphere in a different culture. The two things I will remember forever, is the great group of friends I made there and the Chinese food. Maybe the most important lesson about the exchange period I learned is that I apparently can live in every culture. Because, a lot of people told me, if you can make it work and feel at home in China, you can do that everywhere. I have been on a trip to Thailand to meet my girlfriend halfway through the semester, and I really was looking forward to go 'home' again, home to China. That was a very good sign for me.

TOPIC: Tips for future students

Would you recommend an exchange period? Would you recommend your host university? What should prospective students bring with them/leave behind? What preparation is required for going on exchange to this destination? Was there anything you should have done in preparation that you didn't do?

I would definitely recommend an exchange period to everyone. If you do have the opportunity and the funds to make it work, do it. It is such an enrichment of your life. And I don't think it really matters where you go to, it is always a great experience. And I would also recommend my host university. BUT, people have to know what to expect from Jinan, Shandong University and China in general. If you can't handle a different culture, frustrations about these cultural differences, than I would not recommend Shandong University. The most time for your preparation for this university is required for your visa. Because of these cultural differences, sometimes it takes a while to get a real answer to an email or question. Be proactive in stead

of reactive, than it will be alright. I think I did everything required for my preparation. A lot of stuff still can be done after you have arrived.

TOPIC: A picture is worth a thousand words

If you took any pictures or made any videos that you would like to share with future exchange students, please include them (or e-mail them separately). Pictures that show your daily life or symbolize your exchange period are especially interesting for future exchange students.