

“What The Hell Do You Want in China?”

During my exchange, I studied at the China University of Political Science and Law (CUPL) in Beijing, which is said to be one of the best law schools in China. After this experience, I can truly say that China is crazy. I spent 6 months in this gigantic country – first travelling, then studying – and still, I only saw a very small fraction of what China is really about. Nevertheless, it was probably the most exciting and enriching time of my life as well as the biggest challenge I could ever have imagined.

When I first arrived at the Beijing airport in the beginning of September, my first impression was astonishing: It was still very warm, I was surrounded by hundreds of Chinese people and a lot of smog, and nobody spoke any English. Taxi drivers did not really understand where I wanted to go and the prices seemed to be so low that I did not understand that I was actually completely ripped off. In addition to this, Beijing has over 20 million inhabitants, which was a little bit more than what I was accustomed to in Groningen. This experience and the fact that I have never been outside of Europe before are the reasons why I eventually came to understand what the term “culture shock” really means.

My First Impression

The exchange between CUPL and the University of Groningen was conducted for the first time, which was the reason why the overall organisation was still very chaotic. Therefore, I obviously felt like the luckiest person on earth when I found out that another student, in fact, a very good friend from our program would accompany me on my journey. Our first challenge was to enter the country. As a prospective student you need to apply for a student visa in your home country, which is only possible with the necessary documents that are produced by the foreign university. Unfortunately, these highly official documents were lost in the mail so we needed to enter the country with a tourist visa, which was unexpectedly troublesome. After we managed to cross the Chinese border, we then had to extend the visa and eventually transform it into a residence permit, which cost us a lot of time, money and nerves. The second challenge awaited us at the Beijing airport – finding our university. Taxi drivers in Beijing can neither speak nor read English. Due to the fact that our Chinese study advisor was very new, she forgot to give us the address in Chinese and, even though I am good at pantomime, this task was definitely beyond my capabilities. However, when we eventually arrived at the university, our study advisor and us were equally surprised and happy to finally meet each other in person, and she totally made up for the troubles caused. Looking back, I can say that I am very glad for this experience because I learned the first important lesson in China: “Don't panic, everything will be okay!” So no matter what happened or what went wrong, I never panicked again because in the end I knew it would be alright – and that held true to end. So after a very troublesome start, it only became better and better.

Living in China

China is a different world. It is nothing like Europe and it will definitely blow your mind. Every city seems to have its own kind of people, landscape, traditions and food. Beijing is, in my view, one of the most cultural and non-Western cities of China, despite being the political capital; I immediately fell in love with it as every district is different and has its very own charm. While Haidian is full of universities, Wudaokou is the student district with many foreigners, nice restaurants and bars, Sanlitun the shopping mile and destination of the high society and party animals, and Chaoyang the central business district. And going by subway is only 0,25 Euro per ride! However, the best part is the Great Wall. There are many different parts and even though I went there five times already, I would always go back. (But don't tell the Chinese that it is not only a Great Wall, but also a great hostel!)

Housing and Facilities

During my studies, I lived in a dormitory on the graduate campus in Haidian District. Exchange students enjoy certain privileges, for instance, they only have to share a room with one other person and pay 8 Euro a month, while Chinese students have to live together with up to 7 other graduates for the same price. Even though I was lucky, as my roommate moved out after two weeks, everyone else who shared a room was quite happy and no one had any complaints. Nevertheless, it would be easy to switch rooms if you were really unsatisfied with your roommate. Furthermore, the extra costs for electricity, internet and using the showers did not account to more than 2 Euro a month.

Another nice feature of the dormitory is the gym, which is located in the basement and costs only 0,50 Euro per visit. In addition to this, there are also billiard tables, ping-pong tables and badminton fields, which provided a great source of entertainment, especially after a couple of beers.

Due to the fact that the dormitory is not equipped with a kitchen, lunch and dinner always provides lots of opportunities to meet people and socialize. The campus itself has two big canteens, of which one is Muslim and one Chinese. The food is incredibly cheap and it was hard to pay more than 1,50 Euro per meal; nevertheless, the bigger challenge was to get used to Chinese food. My recommendation: Just don't go for the chicken feet and the hundred-year eggs and you will probably be fine! In case you do not like any of the food served in the canteen (nobody will judge you), there are also many restaurants around the corner for the same price.

Language and People

At this point I would like to tell you something about the Chinese people and their culture. Even though Chinese people are rather reluctant to speak to foreigners at first, you will see that they are the friendliest and most caring people as soon as you get to know them. In addition to this, it is crucial to learn at least the most basic Chinese skills. Therefore, the second lesson is: Be able to say the name of your university in Chinese, no matter how drunk you are! Also, it is very useful to have some Chinese bargaining skills as there are no fixed prices anywhere in Beijing. From my own experience I can tell that as soon as you speak some Chinese, the locals will open up to you and be incredibly interested in where you are from and what you are doing. You should also keep in mind that going to China is not a typical Erasmus exchange, but it is a cultural and personal challenge. Foreign exchange students are rare and there are no organized events for them. However, we were offered to give some German lessons, which enabled us to meet many nice and inspiring Chinese graduate students and due to the fact that everyone lives in one building, we eventually got to know everyone very fast.

Studying at CUPL or “Zhong Guo Zheng Fa Da Xue”

Studying in China was not as fruitful and inspiring as I had expected. Each lecture is between three and four hours long and 100% attendance is expected (otherwise it will be reflected in your final grade). Additionally, the course requirements are slightly questionable as you are supposed to write a paper for every course about a topic, which has NOT been discussed in class. Therefore, many people wisely used the lectures to finish their master applications, watch the latest movie or simply take a little nap. However, some courses were also very interesting like “Human Rights Law”, “Foreign Investment Law” and “Chinese Law and Society”. You can choose from a great variety of courses and you have to take at least 5 courses to obtain the necessary credits.

“What the hell do you want in China?” This was the most frequently asked question throughout my preparations for China, during my stay and even now, and my answer will probably always be the same: “I really don't know”. Looking back, I am still unable to tell exactly what it is about China

that eventually made me love it. It is a country you cannot grasp by reading about it or simply looking at nice pictures. You have to go there and experience it first-hand. Even though China challenged me a lot, I can proudly say that it was the most interesting, inspiring and life-changing experience of my life. Originally, I planned to go to Australia, so when I got the news of being accepted in China instead, I was not really sure whether to be crazily happy or really, really sad. In the end, it turned out to be the best thing that could have happened to me as I opened up a lot, learned Chinese, got some of the best Chinese friends you can imagine and fell in love with a culture I hardly knew existed.