

Agnieszka

Student of the third year of Chinese Studies at Freie Universität Berlin

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Is it worth the bother?

The reason I wanted to go to China is quite simple: I wanted to learn Chinese. By the time I went to Beijing I had been learning Chinese for two years. I was making progress and everything seemed fine but learning Chinese is unlike learning any other European language. The barriers (different script, the fact that it's an analytic language and not a synthetic language like German or English, and the tonal system) at the beginning make the language (both written and spoken) difficult to understand and learn. And I felt, like most people who start learning Chinese that I really need to go to China if I ever want to even begin understanding it. Besides, it would be fun!

On the whole if anyone ever has an opportunity to go to China (even if it means dealing with a lot of bureaucracy both there and at home), they cannot miss it! If you have an even remote interest in Chinese, you NEED to go there. You will never regret it (unless you feel that everything needs to look and work exactly like in your home country – I've met some people who felt this way – in this case save yourself the stress). But if you feel (cliché alert!) that you want to experience something different and learn about a different culture, China is for you.

Possible problems

From my experience China offers great food, nice people and an awful lot of new experiences. Of course there will be unpleasant stuff too, people will want to pull all sorts of scams on you, make you spend 10 times more money on a t-shirt/watch/bag than you normally would (because it's original, good quality, special price for you). But if you try not to be naïve and avoid doing things you wouldn't even do in your home country (like, eg. going to a teahouse in a badly lit back alley with a stranger you just met on the street, just because they were friendly) it is unlikely that you will get scammed – I had the pleasure of turning down a few scammers, nothing difficult, they are not pushy or violent, just cunning.

For me the most problematic thing (as a foreigner) was that if something doesn't work and you're dealing with bureaucracy, it is difficult to get someone to do anything about it. A 北京大学 example:

All foreigners take a test at the beginning of the semester and get assigned to different groups. We did not know if it was possible to change the group (eg. if you took a class that was too difficult – as I did) or not. Some said you could, some said you couldn't. Why you might not be able to change the group you've been assigned to at the beginning is beyond me – I can only guess that they wanted to avoid chaos (obviously it is way better to have students stuck in inappropriate levels than to deal with some chaos at the beginning!). After we were assigned to groups some of us decided we wanted to change. We went to the foreigners' office and asked around. It turned out to be impossible. No changing of groups. Sorry. No way. No. After a couple of group-trips to the foreigners' office, nothing changed. And then after two days I got an e-mail from my teacher (whom I had been bothering with emails for a couple of days) saying that if I wanted to change I needed to go to Room X at 12 noon and I could change the group there. No problem, it looked like a standard procedure, except that no one knew about it. None of the other students would have been able to change the group if the teacher hadn't notified me and I them. So on the whole, if you have a problem, the first thing you hear is "no, sorry". But in some cases you just need to be persistent,

Chinese clerk's "no" doesn't necessarily mean "no" – and it is not even about corruption, the system is simply... off.

Where to go?

If you want to learn Chinese, going anywhere is ok. People speak Mandarin almost everywhere and I don't really think it matters if you go to Beijing or Shanghai, the dialects are different, but it doesn't matter when you're on an intermediate level. Shanghai (I only spent a month there so it's mostly hear-say – although my limited experience with the city seems to confirm it) is a "meat market" (not my phrase). It's very westernized with a lot of clubs and bars (and bakeries, yummm) frequented by wealthy (and not-so-wealthy-but-definitely-aspiring) students and young professionals, both "western" and Chinese – something you don't get in Beijing clubs, there are mostly 外国人 in Beijing clubs. A lot of hooking up takes place in Shanghai clubs and people are definitely more party-oriented, etc. So if you really like to party (and you can afford it – because Shanghai is more expensive than Beijing), Shanghai is for you. Also the air quality is better (although you get an occasional dead bloated pig swimming belly-up in your water supply...). But don't get me wrong, I loved my semester in Beijing and developed a certain sentiment for the city. So on the whole, I believe it does not matter, where you go, you will still love it.

Language outside of the classes

Unless you're a really advanced student, you attend classes only with "westerners" (logical, really) and there is little opportunity to speak Chinese outside the classes (sometimes even in it – but I'll get to that later). Sure you can strike up short conversations with strangers, but they always look the same (Where do you come from? How long have you been learning Chinese? etc.) and if you want to talk more and on a variety of topics you need a language partner. There are some student-associations that pair Chinese speakers with English/German/Spanish etc. speakers, but there's definitely too little of them. The best thing to do is to go to the German faculty and ask around, hang up a couple of notes with your phone number and email address, saying that you're a German native-speaker looking for a language partner. This method works really really well.

The courses

At 北京大学 there are about 20 hours to do per week (no more) – each "hour" is a 45-minute lesson (with a bell ringing in between, which makes you feel like you are at school again). At the intermediate level there are 8 汉语 classes (written Chinese) and 6 口语 classes (spoken). Additionally, you can choose up to 6 hours (eg. business Chinese (4 hours) and pronunciation (2 hours)). I was not impressed by the teaching standards. The best course was pronunciation (although there were 3 classes to choose from and only one was really good). In the spoken Chinese class the teacher did most of the speaking and lacked the methodological knowledge to get the students to interact with him. Most people sat silent or said a couple of sentences during the class. Even if you wanted to speak (and I did) there were few opportunities. The size of the classes was partly to blame, around 17 people in a group, 30 in business Chinese (which was OK because this class wasn't really about speaking). What I found very good about the system there, is that they make it compulsory you to attend classes (every lesson skipped is 1 point less in your final grade - out of a 100) and they make you study, with 听写 every second class or so and two tests (mid-term and at the end of the semester). So you do learn quite a lot.

Practical issues

I cannot write much about important stuff like looking for accommodation or setting up a bank account, because everything was organized by the University. I don't really think there is anything important that you cannot buy in China and I would definitely advise against taking a lot of luggage (clothes are quite cheap). As for insurance, at 北京大学 there was an introductory meeting before the semester start where you could buy Chinese medical insurance (compulsory and absolutely necessary!!!).

Internship

If you are looking for an internship in China, you should not have a problem. There are a lot of opportunities for an internship/work in China if you're a native speaker of German (and even if it's just a foreign language to you, there are opportunities as well). I found an internship through Chinese websites (智联招聘 (zhilian zhaopin: zhaopin.com). 中华英才网(zhonghuayingcaiwan), 前程无忧, (qianchengwuyou: 51job.com)) with job offers by simply typing in: 德语(deyu – German). DO NOT pay for an internship. If you know Chinese a bit and have some time, just look for it yourself (there's always Google Translate and in Google Chrome, you can make it translate the whole page without having to copy it into Google Translate). I did an internship at a company that paid 3000 yuan per month and paid for a double room with a bathroom at the 锦江 Inn in Shanghai city center (near the Renmin Park) and I'm not even a German native speaker . And of course there's always the 关系 that you may use looking for an internship, although they weren't helpful to me personally.

Advice?

If I were to give one piece of advice to someone going to China, I would say: Chill out! Don't expect everything to go smoothly. If you have a bureaucratic problem to deal with, be prepared to spend twice (sometimes thrice) as much time on it as you would in Germany. If you're travelling, always leave earlier, have an address written in Chinese, enough cash on your person to survive two days and patience. China is chaotic (and I'm from Poland, not Germany). But with a right attitude, it'll be a pleasant kind of chaotic. You can just strike up conversations with random people while waiting in a huge waiting hall for your train, and in 99,9% of the cases people will be very enthusiastic and will want to talk to you, and take pictures (let you try on their hat, listen to your music, etc.)... And the two-hour wait will be over before you know it. So basically, just enjoy the differences!

Contact me!

If you have any questions (especially about studying at 北京大学) please write me an e-mail: cioncinka@zedat.fu-berlin.de
You can write in English/German/Polish. I will be really happy to share any information/experience with you.