

Experience Report for the exchange program in Peking University

First Days

The first days in Peking were quite hectic. After landing in Peking, I took the airport shuttle bus (25 RMB) which sent me to Zhongguancun, one of the options recommended in the university brochure, and subsequently took a cab to the accommodation. There were several important tasks to complete upon arrival, such as moving into the accommodation, getting a SIM card, opening a bank account, matriculating and signing up for orientation events.

Moving into the accommodation was rather straightforward, but one should know that there is a 1000 RMB deposit to be paid on the first day (so bring enough cash). As for the sim card, the university offered an extremely good deal of 200 RMB for a whole year which was a good deal even though I was only there for one semester. Opening a bank account was rather tedious because there was only one single branch where all international students had to open the account at. It is recommended to go to the bank early in the morning to avoid getting sent back. Other than that, matriculation went rather smooth as health insurance and registration for orientation activities were all done in the same building on the same day. It is highly recommended to sign up for all the orientation events because they are good opportunities to explore famous sites like the Forbidden City, Great Wall of China, etc. and make some friends along the way.

Daily life



In general, life in Peking was very comfortable. Most international students live in PKU Global Village, which is about a 5-minute walk away from the entrance to the Peking University or to the metro station. Students who receive a scholarship from the university get free accommodation and have to share a room with another international student. There is a community toilet and shower area in each floor which is cleaned by the staff several times

every day. Those who do not get the scholarship or do not wish to share a room have the option to rent a single room in a shared apartment in the Global Village which costs about 100 RMB/day. The global village itself is rather well equipped with study rooms, cafes, restaurants, a convenience store, a sports complex and a karaoke lounge just below the dormitory.

About 2 km away from the dormitory lies WuDaoKou (五道口), a district with lots of good restaurants, bars and clubs that students hang out at. Besides, a shopping district and food street at HaiDianHuangZhuang (海淀黄庄) just two metro-stations away is another students' favourite as it houses several large, metropolitan shopping centres.

As a big eater, Peking is a paradise for me. There are many options ranging from really cheap food in the school canteen (10-30 RMB), getting delivery (20-40 RMB), or eating out at a restaurant (50+ RMB). The food at the school canteen was quite worth the price, but it always comes with a huge crowd and it is usually difficult to get a table during lunchtime. Alternatively, there are also eateries outside the campus (west gate, south gate) which also serve cooked meals at an affordable price. Cooking is rarely done at the dormitory since the common kitchen only has an induction heater (without the pots and pans) and a microwave oven, besides the fact that ordering delivery and eating out are both affordable and convenient.

China is an extremely digitalized country. Monetary transactions are mostly done using phone applications (apps) Wechat or Alipay which is linked to your bank account (the staff at the bank helped with this after I made the account). There is theoretically no need for cash or cards when going out, but one should always have some spare cash and a portable charger in case the phone battery dies out. Several extremely useful apps have made my life extremely convenient, such as Eleme (饿了么) and Meituan (美团) for delivery (food, groceries, etc. with generous discounts), DiDi (滴滴出行) for getting a cab, Dianping (大众点评) for reviews and recommendations of food and activities, and taobao (淘宝) for online shopping.

The University



The main campus of Peking University is relatively large. Getting around the campus can be quite complicated for new students, especially if one cannot communicate well in mandarin. There are rental bikes in school which can be used to get from one place to another. Some students also travel around in electric scooters which can be purchased for a few hundred RMB (there is a charging station below the dormitory). The campus has almost everything required for daily life – supermarkets, restaurants (and canteens), cafes, convenience stores, sports complexes, a theatre for performing arts and movies and even a beautiful park with a lake. The prices in the main campus are usually way cheaper than those at the dormitory, but it can come with the cost of a larger crowd or a longer queue.

Studies

As a Chemistry Master student, I mainly took graduate Chemistry courses at the university. Exchange students are classified as undergraduates, which means that the course registration system only contained undergraduate courses. Registration for graduate courses are done on paper with approval from the teaching department at the Chemistry faculty, which was rather easy to get in my case.

Despite being fluent in Mandarin, taking lessons in Mandarin was quite challenging for me because of the new vocabulary I had to pick up. It took me quite a few weeks to get used to the Chinese names of the elements in the periodic table as well as certain chemistry jargons, but I made a list of these new words and eventually memorized them. Besides attending classes, there are also many seminars (many times a week) where scientists from all over the world were invited to present their research, some of which I found extremely relevant to what I was studying.

On top of regular classes, I took up an internship in one of the research groups in Peking university. Although I eventually found out that the research field is not really what I am interested in, I found that it was a good opportunity gain practical experience in the lab and also learn about the working conditions in China. I found the work atmosphere really pleasant and the colleagues were very helpful in giving tips. However, the long working hours (can be up to 12 hours a day, including Saturday), relatively low wages and overcrowded laboratories made me reconsider about a career in China.

Besides subject-relevant courses, the Peking university also offers many leisure courses which are open to all students such as sports, music, art, calligraphy etc – for free. Furthermore, there is also a variety of student clubs which offer extracurricular activities which are certainly worth joining if one has time for it. I personally took up singing classes offered by the university as well as flute lessons offered by the Chinese orchestra student club in the university and found them extremely worth the time and money.

Travel

China is extremely large and has a lot of cities worth visiting. Even within Peking itself, there are numerous historical and nature sites that are worth visiting during the weekends. Throughout China, there is a huge variety of tourist attractions like ancient towns, palaces, scenic nature spots like mountains and rivers, magnificent cityscapes and many more. In many cases, undergraduate students can get a 50% discount for the entrance ticket (so always tell them you are an undergraduate). Transport modes include the plane, the normal train, the high-speed train (高铁), or even the bus for short distances. I personally liked the high-speed train as it is quite comfortable, and it is also easier to travel to the train station than to the airport (in Peking and in many cities). The slow train is an extremely cheap alternative, but it comes with a longer, noisier journey accompanied with a constant smell of cigarette smoke.

Travelling during official public holidays (like the National Day week in October) absolutely requires early planning and reservations in order to even get a train ticket. Popular cities like Peking, Shanghai etc. are typically extremely overcrowded during national holidays and one could consider going to less popular ones like Tianjin for a less stressful vacation.

One very important thing to note while travelling in China is that most hotels are not legally allowed to host foreign guests. Therefore, it is always good to check before booking a hotel room, or just go through a travel agency like Ctrip which sometimes offer good deals exclusively for international students. I typically use the Qunar app (去哪儿网) to do most of my bookings (transport, hotel, guided tours) because it offers extremely good deals and also an option to filter hotels that accept foreign guests.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, I feel that the exchange programme in Peking University is extremely enriching and satisfying. I have learnt a lot about my subject, the working environment in China, some music, the Chinese culture and definitely had lots of fun in the process. It was a memorable experience and I would certainly visit China again in the future if the opportunity arises.