

Direct Exchange Experience Report (Peking University, 2021-2022 Winter)

千里之行，始於足下。

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

Traveling has always been part of my life, as well as living abroad. Due to my mixed background, I have always considered it important to truly experience a culture – not only in the canonical, being a tourist for a week and then going home kind of way, but rather by being somewhere for a longer time and experiencing the blessings and the hardships of a place – whether my own, or one entirely unknown and foreign to me. For these reasons, it was clear to me that I would do an exchange while doing my master's at the Free University of Berlin. As I have been fortunate enough to visit China before, and since part of my academic interest lies with cross-culturalism, human rights, and China, it was clear to me that I would want to do my exchange there. And so, I applied for a direct exchange for the 2020/2021 winter semester at the Peking University (PKU). However, the events of the beginning of 2020 have reshaped the course of history, as well as everything for me.

Due to the outbreak of the pandemic, my exchange was in question, so I decided to postpone it to a time frame, which I assumed would be fitting and I would have the chance to travel to China. According to my understanding at that time, an exchange would not make sense, if I cannot travel there, especially since my goal was to better my Mandarin knowledge. Studying and practising Chinese is a massive challenge and I was sure being in Beijing would be greatly beneficial for me. However, reality has intervened with my plans, so I had to decide to either do my exchange remotely, entirely online, or not at all in the end. I felt that I have invested so much in my application and in studying the language that I could not choose to not do the exchange. My love for and interest in China were decisive factors in the end, so I confirmed my entirely online presence for the 2021/2022 winter semester, for the Chinese as Second Language department at the Peking University.

Although the exchange office of FU has been immensely helpful and quick to respond to all of my questions and concerns, the organization of the exchange has not been the easiest, especially since most of the platforms I had to use to choose courses, give information, handle emails, were in Mandarin. I very much recommend using Google Chrome and its translating function from day one to those whose language level requires it. It is also essential and recommended for everyone to download WeChat, the Chinese equivalent of WhatsApp, as a lot of the organization and the communication with teachers and their assistances takes place there. I would like to highlight that the organizational team and the exchange office of Peking University were also very helpful, but way slower, especially taking into consideration the

massive time difference between Europe and China. For the mentioned reason, I would recommend not leaving anything to the last minute. Deadlines are very strict and so, one should think way ahead when planning.

The next step in my journey was choosing the courses themselves, as well as their time. It was a quite taxing task, as I had to get over the hurdle of my own circumstances: I am working full time, so the mentioned time slots had to align with my life. Although the professors took into consideration the massive time difference (7 or 8 hours with Europe, depending on the winter or spring term) between that part of Asia and Europe, it was hard to find a time suitable for all the exchange students from all over the world. Regarding the mentioned, I would recommend everyone to take into consideration their own capabilities and the fact that the language course, 4 times a week is truly challenging and requires a lot of preparation and studying before and after the lessons as well. I think studying a language depends on multiple factors, such as having a flair for languages, being lucky to grow up with more languages, etc... but also it depends on perseverance and constant practicing. This is the extra time one has to count with when signing up for the courses at PKU. The only unfortunate timing, which we could not solve was the time of the exams. Since due to the pandemic, the semester was a bit shorter, the date of both my oral and written language exams were right after Christmas.

My teachers were absolutely lovely, and they left a very good impression on me. I attended one English language course and the rest of them were in Mandarin. The teachers' English level was immaculate, and they were always happy to explain something in English in case we were unable to understand it in Mandarin. They were also especially helpful with getting the right materials for studying and they prepared a lot of extra documents so we could practice even better. Attendance is a very important aspect of the courses and in case someone is not present, it is reflected in the grade, just like completing the given homework. In case someone has a valid reason for not being present in class, it is of course allowed. They are especially understanding. When I was unable to attend a lesson, I could always watch it after, since everything was recorded.

All in all, I would say that this experience has been lovely, yet very difficult at times. I definitely could learn, not only the language and about the culture of China, but also about testing my own boundaries of managing parallel life schedules. Exploring China and getting to know the people and the culture more in depth were truly missing, but I am grateful to have had the chance to study at such a good university in China and in the whole of Asia. My language level definitely is way better than it was before and the boost of understanding more and more of natives speaking and having the chance to be able to read in Mandarin and to watch a movie in it, is definitely a reward worth aiming and striving for.