

Experience Report: Online Exchange Semester at Fudan University – Shanghai

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Introduction

During the fall of 2021 I participated in the graduate exchange program between Goethe University and Fudan University. The Fudan University is known as one of the best universities in China and I was very grateful that I was accepted. Since the exchange semester took place during the pandemic, China did not admit any foreigners. Therefore, the semester and classes were conducted completely online and off campus without requiring to be in China.

Application/Registration Process

Since the capacity for graduate students applying for the Fudan University was limited to one student, I began preparing my application documents during January 2021. For the application a letter of motivation alongside a TOEFL exam was required which is an English language exam that evaluates the test taker's proficiency to communicate in English. This test costs money and takes some time to prepare for. Therefore, depending on the current English skills, I would advise to plan at least one week to study for it. A minimum score of 80 was required. Further documents that I submitted were my bachelor's degree, Chinese language certificates, and other extracurricular activities.

After submitting my documents via email, I received my nomination in March.

Online Format

Following my nomination in March, I was contacted by Fudan University's coordinator in May who informed me that due to the ongoing pandemic, the university was unable to grant visas and therefore foreign students would not be able to enter China. I was given the option to either relocate my exchange semester to the following spring semester or conduct the semester online. I chose the latter since it was not certain that the pandemic would have ended in the following semester.

The coordinator then initiated the registration process, and I was officially a student at the Fudan University.

Even though classes were online, I was able to apply for Auslandsbafög. And since I did not have to fly to China and pay for accommodation, I did not have much spendings.

Online Lectures and University Regulations

The Semester started officially in mid-September. A Zoom link was provided to all international students with an introductory session outlining the study regulations and what to expect. In the graduate courses, most of the lectures at Fudan give three credits, which is equal to six credits at the Goethe University. A few students were in China due to them living there pre-pandemic, however, every course was exclusively held online via zoom. Courses were mandatory and held in English. Attending classes makes up around 10% of the grade. Additionally, we had to submit a Covid-19 report every day which updates our health status (which in my opinion was pointless, since we were not in China).

In the first week, we could choose which courses we would take. Our selection has to be recorded in a list and sent back to the coordinator. After a certain deadline it was no longer possible to make any changes to this list. The grading system consists of the following tiers: A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D+, D, F.

I took the following courses:

1. Basic Chinese I (2CP):

Basic Chinese I is the first part of the Basic Chinese course at Fudan. This course teaches Chinese to complete beginners and is mandatory if you are studying for a degree in China. The second part Basic Chinese II is also mandatory. Both courses are held in parallel, therefore, it is not possible to attend both courses at once since attendance is mandatory. This course focuses on the absolute basics starting with pronunciation, learning the pinyin system, basic Chinese grammar, and phrases. The exam was not easy but fair. I could not transfer the grade from this course to my studies at Goethe. Even though it is useful to get an introduction to the Chinese language, I would not necessarily recommend this course. A language course is largely based on communication and interaction between participants which this course lacked on the one hand due to the online format but also due to the teacher not fostering an interactive environment. But if you are very interested in learning the language, this course can certainly help.

2. Globalization of Chinese Firms (3CP):

Globalization of Chinese Firms is a management course which focuses on Chinese firms such as Huawei, Lenovo etc. and their strategies for establishing market leadership in foreign countries. Although this topic is highly interesting, the format of the course was very poor in my opinion. The lecture was organized having the students prepare the classes and topics. In the first week, every student was tasked with research papers that were presented on a weekly basis. These presentations had to be recorded and uploaded to Fudan's E-learning website which would make up the content of the course. We only had live lectures once a month with no alternative time slot (which meant that I had classes at 3 AM German time). We also had to finish an assignment where different sectors of a specific country had to be analyzed. Finally, a research paper with a similar extent such as the bachelor's thesis had to be submitted as the final task. There was no exam. All in all, I would not recommend this course because of the teaching format, the severe workload, and arbitrary grading.

3. Chinese Economy (3CP):

Chinese Economy is a course that explains how China has developed to become the country it is today. The course investigates China's history, society, financial, and political system. Courses were held every week with an alternative replay session on the weekends for students that could not make it. The teacher was very friendly and open. Two homework assignments (maximum word count of 1000) and two essays had to be submitted (maximum word count of 1500). No exam had to be written. All in all, this was my favorite course since the lectures were very interesting and I learned a lot about China. The workload was very manageable, and the grading was fair. I would say that this course is a must take if you are studying at Fudan University.

Final Comments

It was very unfortunate that international students could not enter China. The atmosphere and the experience are definitely not the same if you are not there in person. Therefore, if the choice between an online and on-campus exchange semester, the on-campus variant would always yield a more memorable experience.

Although I was not able to live in China directly, I am still grateful that I was given the opportunity to participate in the exchange semester. I was still able to talk to other international students and learn a lot about China. There is no doubt, that I will visit Shanghai and the Fudan University campus. If the chance was given to conduct the semester in person, I would really recommend that.