

# **Exchange at Zhejiang University Hangzhou**

**WS 17/18**

Early in September I started my first semester abroad as part of my QTEM exchange. This program requires two long durations in foreign countries in order to improve one's ability to adapt to moving environments and to achieve insight into teaching methods and processes in order quantitative universities. My first choice was the Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, China. This university is frequently ranked as one of the top 5 universities in China and one of Asia's best research college. The school of management is located at the Zinjingang campus, an area as big as my home village in Germany.

After I arrived at the airport in Hangzhou I took a taxi directly to the university in order to get enrolled. The first things that one notices are the huge problems arising from the language barrier. English speaking Chinese are the exception. Taxi drivers seldomly speak English and communication with them is only possible via mobile phone. Luckily the university provided a sheet with standard Chinese sentences in both Chinese signs and Latin letters. Unfortunately the sentence "bring me to Zhejiang University" brought me to the wrong campus, so when arriving there I had to store my luggage in the administration building and take another taxi to the other campus.

The waiting time during registration was a good possibility to meet other exchange students which was not hard, as the registration on that day was only for students from abroad. Although the exchange students come from all parts of the world, there seem to be especially strong connections between Pakistan and African states as the majority of students came from those countries. After a short time a core of around 10 European students which did one semester of their graduate program in Hangzhou crystalized. After the person in charge for our program hand us our new student IDs, we were sent to our dorms.

Unfortunately, the promised dorms on the campus were already fully booked, so the university summarily booked hotel rooms in a nearby hotel (Hanting Express), which should house two exchange students a time. Those rooms were incredibly small so that eventually roommates had to get very well acquainted, as privacy was beyond questions. Coincidentally my roommate was a German politics student from Wurzburg and we shared common interests as travelling, experiencing Chinese culture or exploring the Chinese cuisine, so that we became close friends over the past months.

The first week was planned as an orientation week, which means you should organize several things which are essential for living in China. Among those were for example creating a bank account, signing a mobile phone contract or searching for diverse apps which support you in your everyday life. I do not know where I would be today without translation or map apps. As it turned out it was a smart move to plan a whole week for the tasks as normally without speaking Chinese properly the simplest task are somehow impossible or at least take time to accomplish. The city of Hangzhou, which is part from Shanghai only by a one hour train ride, is far less internationalized than its more famous neighbor. Therefore it only rarely occurs that employees at banks or at the university speak English.

A great help in organizing my life in Hangzhou was my buddy Emma. She was very kind and we will maintain in friendship as we also met often for coffee and tea. She gave me traditional Chinese gifts whereas I tried to convince her of the favors of German sweets. To be fair, she had a lot of work with me and even called the police for me once, because I lost something in the streets. Especially for students from such different cultures the buddy program is immensely important and my deepest respect hold for students helping out exchange students with their individual struggles. After we organized the most important things of our everyday life the first week of university started. The transformation process of Chinese credit scores into ECTS is somehow not very accurate so I had to choose 8 courses in order to achieve a full workload of 30 ECTS. The first week was used to introduce the outline of the courses and we had the possibility to meet our future classmates. It appeared that classes were relatively small with approximately 20-30 students. Chinese students attending the English taught lessons have a high level of English skills. They are open minded and although not very eager to search contact with exchange students, conversations with them are very interesting and nice. We often went for coffees with them to talk about differences in culture and funny similarities. I will definitely stay in touch with some of them, as they also are part of the QTEM network.

Concerning the workload of my course selection I quickly noticed that will not have a lot of time to travel around every week or just relaxing in the sun. Actually I started going to the library in the first week of university, which is quiet normal in China. Usually professor are trying to encourage students to study during the semester by asking for essays and homework every week. Very important for them is the teamwork aspect, so the quality of the essay does not have to be perfect when the professor noticed that the team did work well together. To put it in a nutshell, we spent a

lot of time in the library, which is not entirely bad, as the Wi-Fi there was acceptable fast and the coffee was comparably cheap.

Shortly after our arrival one of China's national holidays started, the so-called Golden Week. We used the free week to travel to north China as a group of exchange students. I would say it was in this week that we experienced China and its culture for the first time fully. Our journey led to very distinct places where we have been the only Western persons for a long time and people gathered to take pictures of us and with us and tried to talk to us in basic Mandarin. The trips were always very good opportunities to improve one's Chinese and it has been a lot of fun to travel the original Chinese style, which is sitting in fully packed train wagons for 24 hours and more. People there has been very nice and we drank liquor with them and ate lots of different, sometimes weird, Chinese snacks. People are incredibly friendly and kind once they consider yourself as a friend and they helped us with difficulties countless times because they knew we did not understand the different procedures of traveling and getting hotels. One must not forget that the Chinese state is watching you with every step you take, so we were also required to tell the authorities where we wanted to travel and in which hotels we will stay. Some hotels are not allowed to host foreign guests and it took us quite a bit of time to figure out how to find places where we were allowed.

It was also during this first trip that we understood the importance of speaking Chinese in order to fully enjoy our stay in China, so we were eagerly studying Mandarin after the journey. Very cool methods to study were meetings with Chinese students where both parties could improve the individual language of interest. I am sure this language skills will turn out to be very useful in the future learning this incredibly difficult language was a lot of fun.

Interestingly the studies intensified the friendships between exchange students and domestic students, we often helped each other with essays and exercises. Also the final exam period, with all its troubles, was a good opportunity to improve the bonds between us students. Although I am currently still waiting for my results I have a good feeling about the outcome and I am very glad about the choice of my courses as they were both interesting and demanding. I learned two new computer languages and focused on data management overall in which Zhejiang university is very strong.

It is of course very hard to describe all the experiences of those last months in a few lines, without being able to detailed outline the craziness and beauty of China. It has been the most adventurous time of my life so far and I am proud to state that this time has changed who I am in a positive way.

I will maintain in close friendship with both domestic Chinese students and exchange students and several small surprises will stay unforgettable. My exchange has been absolutely mind blowing and I am very grateful that I got the opportunity to extend my horizon. Many thanks also for the financial help of the scholarship of Banco Santander. This money was well spent in drinks with locals and journeys around this epic country.

Jean-Philipp Preiß