

## **Study Abroad: My Experience as an Exchange Student in China**

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*“The world is a book and those who do not travel read only a page;” - Saint Augustine*

Studying abroad is an opportunity to grow and test one's limits. In the interest of encouraging other students to pursue international education I would like to share my experiences and the general bits of wisdom I gained along the way. I was inspired by and chose to study abroad due to my interest in foreign languages. In my life I have always had an unwavering dream. My dream was about equality, diversity and understanding. I grew up in a small town where everyone knew each other and everybody held some kind of prejudice. While people judged others I tended to wonder about cultural differences with intrigue. This led to my interest in foreign languages and culture. I always knew that I wanted to travel and study in Asia. I believe that in order for our society to work efficiently we must understand each other, embrace our differences, and learn from one another. My journey was only truly able to begin because of my parents' encouragement, their struggles and morals. They taught me to always be sincere, treat everyone equally, be responsible for my actions, and, most importantly, that perseverance is the key to my success.

During my undergraduate career, I have gained friends from all over the world, learning something new about culture and language every day. I began studying Chinese my first semester. At first it was difficult but after studying a specific language for a while I developed a new way of thinking. During my second semester of college, my roommate was from Turkey. We both shared the same love for cultural understanding. As a result we tried to expand our cultural awareness to everyone in our dorm by hanging a different word on our door every day. After studying Chinese for two years, I decided it was time to study abroad. The main reason for studying abroad, from my perspective, was to improve my language skills through immersion.

### **Making the Dream Come True**

#### **Getting Prepared for the Journey**

The following is a list of fundamental matters that must be handled before going abroad:

- *Apply for and receive passport and visa*
- *Obtain abroad address give to family, friends, and advisor*
- *Visit a physician for checkup and receive any necessary immunizations*
- *Consult with bank (debit cards, abroad ATM fees, and travelers checks)*
- *Research and purchase travel insurance*
- *Read safe travel guidelines*
- *Research the customs of intended destination*

## Scholarships and Resources for Studying Abroad

When I applied to study abroad, initially expressing my worry about funds, my study abroad advisor recommended that I apply for the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship. The scholarship was named after a retired congressman from New York. The mission of this program is to “*diversify the kinds of students who study abroad and the countries and regions where they go.*” Today I am proud to say that I am a recipient of the Gilman Scholarship. The funds I was awarded paid for all of my expenses while I was in China, not only the living expenses but also my traveling expenses. Today there are endless resources available for students from any background to pursue their education desires. My advice to all students is to be above excuses, dare to travel, make your aspirations come true, and inspire others. After I had solved my financial worries, the next step was to prepare for my planned journey ahead.

## Packing

*“Don't forget to pack your **courage** for your journey to greatness.” -David Weinbaum*

The hardest part of studying abroad is not deciding which country to travel to, it is the horrible task of deciding what you need to bring. For all students I recommend making a list, waiting for two weeks then cutting all the items suggested to half. After weeks of considerations I believe that the essentials items for all study abroad destinations are: basic medicine, essential electronics (laptop, iPod, camera), power converter for all electronics, travel documents, and travel toiletries. When I was in China I regretted not bring facial lotion because the air was so arid that my face was constantly dry. From my experience and speaking with other students who have also studied abroad, I have found that they all said that they packed too much. A fact that I discovered the hard way on my first trip to China was that many public restrooms do not provide toilet paper and, in some extreme cases, no hand soap.

Using local products while abroad is a valuable experience. I bought Chinese brands of shampoo and toothpaste. I was amazed that the Chinese brand of shampoo was better for my hair than any American brand I had ever tried! On a more serious note, packing for the study abroad experience gives students the chance to realize what is actually essential for living in this materialistic world. Putting my entire life in a suitcase to sustain me for the next six months definitely granted me a new perspective and understanding of life. My challenge to everyone is to use this as a growing experience and learn to appreciate the things that we have.

Before leaving one must have the right mindset to truly appreciate living in another country. One should approach this opportunity with an open mind and a willingness to try anything and to adapt to a new lifestyle. When traveling to any foreign country it is essential to understand that there are different standards and customs of living. When abroad let your experiences, whether good or bad, serve as unexpected surprises. The final concept to embrace is that you cannot control everything. You should approach all situations with patience and tolerance. While I was in China I kept a blog about all my experiences. It is the best way to keep a record of your experience abroad. There are many free websites that allow you to maintain your blog. I kept one for many reasons, but the defining motivation was so my family and friends could experience China with me.

## Departure

Apart from the time when you decided to study aboard, departing is the most exciting, yet frightening moment. In this moment, gather all your courage and walk confidently through the boarding gates, setting in motion the first step of your experience.

“I can finally sympathize with the entire international student population in the United States or elsewhere who has ever decided to live in a foreign country away from their loved ones. I admire their bravery. The understanding that I have acquired today is that there is no way to prepare yourself for all the emotions you will be hit with the day before and the day you leave. Only time and experience can allow you to adapt to the transition from home to your new home in a foreign country. Everyone’s study abroad experience will be different especially how they feel departing for their trip.”

(Posted on my blog September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011)

### **Studying in China**

#### **My Classmates**

“All the international students at Jinan, myself included; through the same experiences we have become our own little family. We have all approached China with the same open attitude. As a result we have not only learned about China, but also we have learned about each other. We cook, study, clean, and travel together!”

(Posted on my blog September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

At my University in Jinan, there were only 7 international students, myself included. There were 3 students from France, 2 from Holland and 1 from the Czech Republic. We quickly formed a close knit family. The friendships that we made are priceless. We were so close because we experienced a lot of the same things, and through this we grew together. We would often cook together, not only learning how to cook Chinese food, but also teaching each other about our own country’s food. One day I was learning how to cook crepes the next a traditional Chinese dish. We learned about each other’s countries, cultures, and languages while we all were living in a foreign one! These are the aspects which make studying abroad such an amazing experience.

#### **My University Experience**

“All of my classes are with the other international students and are taught in English, except for my Chinese class. I am the only foreign student in my Chinese class because I was the only student to study Chinese before I studied abroad. I am taking intermediate Chinese right now. Most of the time I only have homework in my Chinese class but since the semester is coming to an end I have final papers in all my classes. So it has been a blessing that my friends and I have found the perfect place to study in Jinan, Starbucks!”

(Posted on my blog December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2011)

In China I lived in a hotel owned by the university and the international students all lived on the same floor of the hotel. We all had our own rooms with a western style toilet. Later in the semester I saw my Chinese friend’s dorm. I was shocked that she had 7 other roommates, a public restroom, and a shower facility in another building. The living standards between the regular and international students were entirely different. I felt the university provided us with such great living arrangements to make us feel more comfortable.

When I first arrived I was worried that my classes would be difficult but they were very easy. I had 15 credits all taught in English. The classes met twice a week. It was a standard schedule very similar to the schedule at my home university. The only assignments that we had were presentations and final papers. My Chinese class by far was the most compelling for me. It was taught completely in Chinese and I spoke with the best of my ability in Chinese! My language ability improved rapidly due to the one on one teaching.

## **Social Experience**

In general when studying abroad, students will have more free time to enjoy the country in which they are staying. I had a booming social life while I was in China. Chinese people are hospitable and want you to experience their culture and also appreciate their country. I traveled from a small town to a medium sized city in China of about 6 million people. This was a big change for me, but it opened up a whole new world of opportunities for entertainment. China has a drinking culture, so I often went to bars, dance clubs, and karaoke. This is a great opportunity to get to know the younger generation (my generation) in China, but foreigners must be careful. Always go with your close friends. Every week at the club I was approached by strangers just curious about where I was from. I was always offered free drinks. Many Chinese people are curious about foreigners and they want to practice their English. This was a great opportunity for me to make friends and learn about China. While abroad there are endless possibilities and one should take advantage of them. I recommend to everyone to make close friends with the local university students, so they can show you the real, non-tourist parts of the country in which you are staying.

Another issue I would like to mention is romantic relationships abroad. They happen quite often. I had an abroad romance, as did many of my friends, and it added so much to my experience. I dated someone who could not speak English, nor could I speak his mother language. We communicated by our second language, Chinese. I cannot express how much of a thrill it was to speak in my second language every day for every situation possible! Learning to express myself not only to my friends, but also to my boyfriend, in a foreign language was the most amazing and accomplished feeling I have ever felt, even if it was frustrating at times. In retrospect I feel that dating while abroad is a great experience for everyone, but it should be handled responsibly and with realistic expectations. On a final note, we are all responsible adults and studying abroad does not mean you should act in an irresponsible way. You should have fun, enjoy yourself, but be cautious because you are a representative of your country.

## **Traveling in China**

*“A good traveler has no fixed plans, and is not intent on arriving”~Lao Tzu*

### **Qingdao (青岛)**

During the semester, the school arranged for a weekend trip to Qingdao for all of the international students. I love Qingdao for its history and apparent international influence. Qingdao is beautiful coastal city that has a long history, which has been influenced by Germany and Japan. Everywhere in Qingdao you will see this influence not only through the architecture of the city but also the signs translated into 3 different languages.

That weekend my classmates and I feasted on fresh seafood and enjoyed the beach. After the semester had ended I traveled to Qingdao again, but this time I traveled alone. Traveling solitarily was an amazing experience that taught me how to be completely independent. I took a risk...a chance, to see if I could travel in China by myself and I succeeded! I hold Qingdao and it's memory so close to my heart because it is the memory of me traveling alone in a foreign country which always empowers my independent spirit.

### **The Chinese National Holiday in Beijing (北京)**

While abroad I suggest to everyone to travel as much as possible. I had the chance to travel many times during and after the semester had ended. The first place I traveled to was Beijing during the national holiday in China called Guo Qing Jie (国庆节). I left for Beijing with the other

international students from my university. After a night of dancing, with only two hours of sleep, we embarked on the bullet train. This was how we started our trip in Beijing. Everywhere in Beijing was crowded because everyone travels during this holiday. During this time I couldn't take one step in any direction without running into another person. While there I went to all of the normal tourist sites but what I want to talk about is the extraordinary things I experienced.

Once we arrived at the train station in Beijing, we had the option to take the subway or take a taxi to our hotel. This is where the first problem occurred. Being that we were tourists the taxi drivers assumed none of us could speak Chinese or had any knowledge of the normal rate of a taxi. When they saw us, they saw easy money. They tried to charge us three times the normal taxi fee! I acted as the translator and negotiator. If anyone knows me, I am not an aggressive person and definitely the worst possible choice for negotiating. So after that attempt and failure, we decided to decipher the subway map and find our hotel. Using the subway saved us more than 500 Yuan. I recommend this method to anyone traveling in a big city.

I have two favorite memories from Beijing. My friends and I went to a Spanish restaurant for dinner. I had been missing Spanish food intensely since leaving the States. This night we wandered the streets of Beijing trying to find a nice dance club. Eventually we found one, but only after I asked directions in Chinese to two drunken pedestrians who turned out to be Japanese with a very basic level of spoken Chinese! After using what little Japanese I knew to communicate with them, we found a place! But before arriving we found a street vender selling mojitos for 15 Yuan, which was barely over \$2.00!

The second most memorable experience from Beijing was with two of my Korean friends and one Chinese friend. We decided to rent bicycles and ride them from Tianmen square to the Hutongs and then to the Olympic stadium. We rode our bikes for more than 4 hours that day. In my opinion the best times were not at the tourist sites, or even riding the bikes but getting lost with my friends and trying to navigate our way through the streets of Beijing.

## **Guangzhou (广州)**

When the semester was over, I went directly with my Dutch and French friend to Guangzhou. It was just us three girls traveling together. Guangzhou is a beautiful place with a very tropical climate. When I arrived in Guangzhou I felt like I had traveled to another country. In Guangzhou the local language is Cantonese. The Cantonese dialect is completely different from Mandarin which is what I had been studying for three years. The people in Guangzhou can all speak Mandarin but Cantonese is their mother language. I felt like I had been transported to a warm tropical island with no way of deciphering the spoken language. I was just glad that I could read. It was a confusing situation because I could read the writing but everything I heard I did not understand. No one spoke Mandarin unless I asked them a question in Mandarin.

During this trip, I met up with a Chinese friend from my home university in the United States. She showed me all around Guangzhou. I also had my very first experience staying in a hostel. I was a little skeptical, but once I actually stayed in the hostel, it won over my favor. It is a dorm for likeminded travelers. I recommend to anyone traveling abroad to stay in a hostel at least once. Unlike a hotel, for a hostel I had to provide my own towels, toiletries, and a lock to lock up my stuff. We stayed in a room with two sets of bunk beds. The most comforting thing about a hostel is that they offer all the services that a hotel offers except at a cheaper price and there's room sharing.

Later during my week in Guangzhou, I met up with another friend from my abroad institution. I had been his English conversation partner all semester. That day my friend and I were

to meet up with him to go to a tourist site in the city and then celebrate the western New Year with him. I remember that morning vividly because I had to get directions from the front desk of the hostel so I could meet my friend in town. The directions the desk clerk gave me were completely in Chinese and much to my surprise and I could read and understand it all! It was a very rewarding feeling. That night we welcomed the New Year and a new chapter to our lives, by sharing a midnight drink on the outside patio of a quiet bar.

“New Year’s day I said goodbye to my two dear friends at the Guangzhou airport. We had finally reached the time where we would all go our separate ways. Celine, my French friend, was going to Thailand. Suzanne, my Dutch friend, was traveling solo to various places in China. I could finally feel that my semester in China had almost come to an end.”-(Posted on my blog January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012)

### **Living with a Host Family in Lai Zhou (莱州)**

After I said my goodbyes to all my friends in Guangzhou, I traveled to a small city in the Shandong Province called Lai Zhou. I stayed in another friend’s house for a week. Her family welcomed me with open arms. I rested, practiced my Chinese, and enjoyed my time with her family. I recommend everyone to stay with a host family while abroad. It gave me the chance to see the real life of a Chinese family. After my week in Lai Zhou I traveled to Shanghai to take my plane home. I took a 12 hour bus ride from Lai Zhou to Shanghai. I had my own bed in the middle of the bus, but it was a top bunk. The entire 12 hours I felt like I was riding on the watch tower of a boat. I could feel every turn. Everyone who walked on the bus instantly recognized me as a foreigner. Throughout the whole 12 hours I could find someone staring at me. I guess the reason for this was because I was traveling from a small town. Many people from small cities in China are not used to seeing foreigners often.

Every city which I traveled each holds special memories for me. From my travels I will always remember the wonderful time with my friends, and the kindness of my host family. I will always remember the bicycles and \$2.00 mojitos of Beijing, the seaside, sea food, and the beautiful architecture of Qingdao. From Guangzhou I will always remember the lush green scenery, and passing a very warm new year’s night with my friends. While traveling in China I learned many things. Things like never take a taxi unless you’re really good at bargaining, and to always stay in a hostel if possible, it is a great experience! Many great hostels can be found using a travel website, with customer ratings, called *elong*.

### **Culture Shock**

Studying abroad is an amazing experience, but students tend to look at the adventure ahead of them. When they finally arrive at their destination they are blindsided with the other aspects of studying abroad. Something everyone faces abroad is culture shock.

### **Time Difference**

Jet lag is something experienced by all travelers. The time the flight arrives is a very important determinant for jet lag. I recommend booking a flight that will land in the afternoon or early night, so the trip can begin on a normal schedule the following day. My second day in China, I woke up early and ran 5 kilometers. Exercise has been proven to reduce jet lag. The key to overcoming jet lag is to follow your normal routine, of three meals a day and exercise. It is also recommended to not take naps during the day when trying to recover from the time difference. Being hurled into another culture is like opening a book in another language and trying to understand it. Overtime I came to understand the culture in China.

### **Cold Showers**

I vividly remember my first day arriving because I had been traveling for the equivalent of 24 hours! The only thing I wanted to do was take a shower and sleep, but I had not brought any towels. After exchanging my money, buying the things I needed, I was finally able to take a shower. Unfortunately it was a cold shower! For the next week I had cold showers, I thought it was because my shower was broken, but unfortunately it was my ignorance...I hadn't been turning on the hot water in the correct way! In this way I learned patience and even with the minor setbacks I learned to look past them and enjoy the world around me.

### **Restroom Terrors**

The first thing I had trouble with was the Chinese squat style toilet. It is a porcelain hole in the ground. I can say that it was always an interesting experience going to the bathroom. It is also important to mention that China has a different standard of cleanliness. Some of the toilets I encountered took all my courage to use because they were so dirty. If you can imagine me trying to balance while squatting and holding my nose...it was a very awkward and wobbly position. I still vividly remember the public restrooms in the subway and on the streets of Beijing and on the bus from Lai Zhou. After just mentioning how unappealing some toilets are I do not want to discourage anyone. It was on rare occasion that I found an unsanitary toilet. The basic line is that China is a beautiful country that is still developing. Not every city is on the same standard. If you are a little squeamish, I recommend using hotel or restaurant restrooms, which are normally equipped with western style toilets.

### **Metropolitan Life**

My second point of culture shock was adjusting to life in a metropolitan city from crowds to the traffic system. Going from a small city that doesn't even have public transportation to a metropolitan of almost 6 million people can be quite overwhelming. I had to learn to be aggressive. People are always in a hurry and there is no waiting in lines at the subway or train station. I had to push my way to the front. To someone who is not use to this behavior, it may seem rude but it is just a different standard. Even with all the pushing and crowds there are still people willing to help others. The traffic in Xi'an and Jinan had the craziest driving I had ever seen. I felt like the drivers of these cities take the traffic rules as guidelines: advisable, but not necessary. Although the traffic was frenzied, I can say that the system worked because during my stay in China I only saw two car accidents. I found out the hard way that cars do not always stop for pedestrians crossing the street. My friends would always laugh at me when I was crossed the street in a rapid dash. China is a huge country with many different standards across the provinces. This is true for all matters in China from food to culture, even traffic. The city I traveled to with the best traffic regulations was Qingdao. The traffic in Qingdao is very organized and rule abiding.

### **Local Custom**

My final aspect of culture shock was firecrackers. Since I was living in a hotel located on the college campus there were many weddings hosted there. It is tradition in a Chinese wedding to set off tons of fireworks to scare away any bad omens or spirits. It was my second morning in Jinan, when I was woken to the lovely surprise of firecrackers. These weddings always took place on the weekends during the morning. These firecrackers are not like the firecrackers during the Independence Day celebration in America. They are long strands of firecrackers that are about three times louder! The first time I heard them I thought they were gunshots! I jumped from my bed completely alarmed. I thought I was in the Chinese ghetto. It took about two or three more strands of these firecrackers to be set off in order for me to realize what they were. Through all the

experiences that I have had with culture shock or any difficulties that I faced in China, I always felt that I learned pretty slowly.

### **Reverse Culture Shock**

Everyone's experience with culture shock will be different. Everyone will be affected by different things. These are just a few of the major things that I had trouble adapting to. Adjusting to the lifestyle in China was an easy transition for me, much easier than when I returned to America. When I left for China I knew I would suffer from culture shock, but returning home I never realized that I would be hit with culture shock again. In China I had gotten use to a big city, drinking hot drinks, eating fresh vegetables every day, and walking everywhere. Coming home I had to drive everywhere, there was too much meat in every dish, everything I ate was too greasy or sweet, and all the drinks were too cold for my stomach. I also struggled for a month with the time difference. I found myself sleeping for three or four hours at a time, then staying up the whole night, only to sleep away most of the day.

I expected everything to be the same when I came home. On a basic level things were the same, but the small things changed which really gave me the sense that I had been gone for almost 6 months. These are all problems students who study abroad can face when adjusting back to their home country. The only way to overcome these problems is to look at them in a positive aspect. Always keep a positive attitude and be patient. I learned that I had to readjust to my home with the same approach that I took adapting to China.

### **Conclusion**

“In an overview of my semester abroad I wouldn't have done anything differently. Studying abroad was one of the best things I have done in my life. I'm so grateful to have had this opportunity and even more grateful for the wonderful friends that I made during my stay in China. From this experience I learned so much about myself and about the world. I feel that I have become a stronger, wiser person from it. If someone would have told me a year ago that I could study and travel around China by myself, I wouldn't have believed them, but here I am. I did it! I remember leaving home crying and nervous about coming to China, but when the semester was over I found myself crying, sad to be leaving the home I made in China.”

(Posted on my blog January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012)

In retrospect studying abroad was the best and most terrifying decision of my young life. I learned that sometimes one must take a chance, take themselves out of their comfort zone to truly grow as a person. Studying abroad not only taught me about myself, but it opened my eyes to the world, to many new perspectives. Before I left for China I had never traveled by myself, but there I was in China by myself traveling, speaking a foreign language, and surviving all on my own. Through this experience I pushed myself to my limits. I learned just how strong and independent of a person I can be. I have a new found confidence and gained a new outlook of understanding and enduring patience. Being an exchange student allowed me to truly blossom into the person I always knew I could be. I finally learned what it felt like to be an international student. I will never forget the international family I made while I was in China, the lessons I learned or the valuable things I discovered about myself. I strongly encourage all students to study abroad or even travel abroad at least once in their life. It is a priceless experience, full of life changing moments.

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#### **About the Author:**

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