

Made China great again! – “Shanghainese” experiences

General information

From August 2016 until January 2017 I did my exchange at the Shanghai University of Economics and Finance (SUFU) in Shanghai, China. All in all, I loved my exchange. Shanghai is a great city with many things to do and to discover.

Preparation

To get things done in China takes a lot of time and often involves complicated bureaucratic processes. In order to make your stay in Shanghai as smooth as possible, a thorough preparation should be made.

In order to enter China, you need to get a visa. Once your host University has accepted you for the exchange program, they will send you the documents you need for an x1 or x2 visa (student visa). However, applying for a visa at your local embassy will take some time so starting early is advisable. Furthermore, if you want to travel around Asia (outside China) during your stay, you need to get a “residence permit”. However, you can only apply for a residence permit upon your arrival in Shanghai. For the application, there are several documents you need to have. For some, you can prepare in advance (recommended) and for others there are special time restrictions/deadlines. For example:

- The “temporary accommodation form” written by the local police station: You need to get this form within 24 hours of your arrival (if you first stay in a hotel, the reception will do it for you. But you will have to get one yourself once you move in your accommodation).
- Health certificate: In order to apply for a health certificate you need to get/ undertake a physical examination first. You can do that with your physician in your home country. However, it is important that you/your physician does all the required tests (ALL blood test, X-rays, etc.) and that you bring everything signed by your physician with you to Shanghai (results, x-ray, etc.). So, please research thoroughly on what is needed. If something is missing, you will have to undertake it over there. But, everything that is signed by your physician (with a stamp etc.) will be accepted and you don’t have to do it again.

Shanghai is a very dynamic, fast living and changing city. So, finding a room (or later a replacement) may not take a lot of time. Usually people look for a replacement for about 2 days, which ultimately means that you won’t get much luck finding an accommodation 1 month before your arrival. If I were you, I would start looking on smartshanghai 3 weeks before your arrival and schedule some viewing appointments. I recommend to take a hostel/hotel for a week or so and visit and keep on looking for places then.

Many students look for a room in the city centre that is close to the Jing’an Temple or People’s square. My University was quite far away from the city centre. But, since I chose Shanghai in order to get to know and experience the Chinese (Asian) culture, I decided to stay in the city centre instead of living close to Uni. Even though it took me 1:20 hours to go to my University, it was worth it

because I loved my neighbourhood and because for partying, dinner or discovering the city it was way better located. Also, often University accommodations do have much lower standards while being as expensive as nice rooms in the city centre.

Finally it is important to get a good health insurance. If you are staying in Shanghai for a longer period of time, chances are good that you will get sick at least once. I've been to local hospitals and they are horrible: Sick people are lying in the hallways on plastic beds with infusions. It seemed that there were no hygienic standards/ regulations and everything was so dirty and there was a horrible smell in the air. Therefore, I went (and would always go again) to a Western hospital. There are a few in Shanghai. Personally, I went to the Family United Hospital, which is very good and everyone speaks English. However, Western hospitals are quite expensive so make sure (beforehand) that your insurance covers all hospital charges in Shanghai if necessary. Also, make sure you get all the necessary vaccinations before coming to China.

Overall, all this may seem quite scary but Shanghai is the most westernized city in China and very safe. Therefore, once you are done with a thorough preparation and made all the necessary arrangements, nothing bad can happen to you.

Arrival

Upon your arrival at the Pudong International Airport, you can either take the metro line 2, a speed train (maglev) or a taxi into the city centre. The metro line 2 takes you directly to People's Square within one hour. You can also take the maglev, a fast train that takes up a speed of about 400 km/h. If you want to take the taxi, please make sure you have the address written down in Chinese characters because usually taxi drivers cannot speak, understand or read English.

Courses

Compared to the ESE, the Universities in Shanghai are very easy and not that time consuming so that you will have a lot of time for other things. Personally, I took Chinese, Financial Accounting, Management and Game Theory. I already had Financial Accounting at the ESE so this course was very easy for me. But also the other courses weren't hard and I got good grades with little effort. However, when choosing your subjects, I recommend taking 12 weeks courses (only) because then you'll finish classes beginning December (for the Winter semester) and are able to be back home for Christmas. Overall, the University is very badly organized and you will not get much support from them. But if you don't take everything too serious and go with the flow, it will be fine.

Finances

In China it is very common to pay in cash, with wechat pay or with alibaba pay. Especially in local shops and restaurants you are often not able to pay by card. Thus, it is important to bring some cash (RMB/ YUAN) when arriving in China. During you stay in China, you can withdraw money at many ATMs with your foreign card for a little or no transaction fee (but double check with your bank). Alternatively, you can easily get a Chinese card. But from personal experience it is quite risky (money gets lost), time consuming and a long process to transfer

money from Europe to your Chinese bank account. So, I wouldn't recommend it (even though you need a Chinese bank account when you want to have wechat - or alibaba pay).

Overall, it is very helpful to have a good amount of cash (rmb/yuan) at your disposal. Especially in the beginning, you will need it in order to settle in. For example, most landlords require you to pay the monthly rent in cash, whereby at the beginning this also includes a 1-or-2-month rent deposit. Considering that rooms/ student accommodations in Shanghai may cost you up to 600 euros (but you can of course also find much cheaper ones), you will need to be prepared to have RMB/ YUAN worth more than a 1000 euros.

Overall, even though everything is very cheap in China, you probably will not be able to spend less money than you did in the Netherlands. This is because all the small amounts will add up to a bigger sum. Given the opportunity,

Daily life

Shanghai is a very big city – not only in terms of inhabitant but also area wise. Thus, going from one place to another – by metro or by taxi – takes a lot of time. However, you will get used to it quickly and Shanghai has a very good metro system in place.

Taxis in China are very cheap you can drive around for half an hour and pay less than 70 RMB (10 EUR). But do keep in mind to have the address written down in Chinese characters ready to show the driver. When going to a restaurant or a special place, you can use apps like “smartshanghai” or “bon app” to look for the destination you want to go. These apps show all the important information you need to know about the place such as address (also in Chinese characters), metro station, opening hours etc. Also, and especially at night, make sure the taxi driver switches on the taximeter – otherwise they often charge you with ridiculous prices.

Contrary to many prejudices, I experienced most Chinese people to be very friendly. However, most locals cannot speak English so be prepared to use some Chinese. If you are in a restaurant, you can order by showing pictures of the dish you like to have (in the menu or on your phone).

A life-saving thing to have is Internet (3G/4G) at all times. Upon arrival, one of the first things that should be done is looking for a place that sells SIM cards. Personally, I'd go to a place where they speak English (so a relatively large phone store). Like everything else, Internet is very cheap. For about 100rmb you should get a prepaid SIM card including 4G Internet and some money left on the card for calls/texts.

What I love about China is the cheap but very good local food. Even though attention should be paid, most of the food that you can buy at street food places is good and germs-free. Just in front of my house, there was one little Chinese man who sold noodles with vegetables for 10 RMB every night on his little bike. I almost went there every night and in my opinion his noodles and rice dishes were one of the best in Shanghai. On the other hand, if you ever get tired of Asian food, there are also many good Western restaurants. However, they have similar prices to the ones in Europe. Nonetheless, cooking in China is not worth the hassle: European products are very expensive and since you can buy food for less than 2 euros, I wouldn't (and didn't) make the effort.

Another thing that I love about the city is that Shanghai is a very clean and very safe. So, even as a girl you can walk along the streets at night without feeling scared or in danger. Finally, another important aspect for an exchange student is the nightlife. In that regard, Shanghai does not disappoint. As a foreigner and through a promoter, you will get into most clubs for free. Often there are also free drinks and a table waiting for you. I recommend bar rouge, m1nt and le baron for a more westernized night outs. Typical Chinese clubs are Fusion, Myst or M2.

Conclusion

All in all, Shanghai is a great city. There is so much to do and to discover and you never get bored. It is one of the most westernized cities in Asia, which sometimes is very comforting to know and to see considering it is so far away from home. It also has positive side effects such as higher hygienic standards, street (and metro) signs written in English, more Western food options etc. Nonetheless, you still get to know the Asian or Chinese culture, which was obviously one of the main reasons I chose Shanghai. Even though, there are a lot of things to do and for you to prepare for, I would always choose Shanghai as my exchange destination again.