Travel Report – Experience China Summer School at East China Normal University

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I am currently in the second year of my degree in Chinese Studies. Because this year is spent studying at Peking University in Beijing, I wanted to come out to China early before the course started in September, to acquaint myself with Chinese culture in advance. With generous college support in the form of a £730 travel grant from the Santander Travel Fund, I was able to attend a month-long summer school in Shanghai from mid-July to early August. I chose Shanghai in part for its reputation as a vibrant and exciting city on the forefront of Chinese modernity, but also to give myself the chance to experience life in a different city to Beijing.

The summer school was the East China Normal University’s Study China programme. This is an intensive language summer school, and so on the third day we were tested and sorted into classes according on our Chinese level. Some students had never studied Chinese before, and so the course ranged from absolute beginners to advanced classes, with intermediate courses in the middle where I was placed. Classes took place every morning from 8:30 to 11:45, with a fifteen-minute break in the middle, and included spoken Chinese and written grammar classes. The material we covered was a lot more useful than that of other Chinese courses I’ve taken before; we learnt vocabulary related to returning products to shops, getting a haircut, as well as more university-based vocabulary of studying and campus life. There were small dictation tests every morning to ensure we were revising the material covered but given that once classes were over we were free for the day, there was more than enough time to revise as well as explore the city.

East China Normal University also arranged several extracurricular activities to show us more aspects of Chinese culture. Lesson-wise, this included Tai Chi classes and the chance to try out Chinese calligraphy, as well as daytrips to various spots around Shanghai, like the Ming-dynasty Yu Gardens and a traditional southern Chinese water town near the city suburbs. Also available was an optional four-day trip to Beijing for a heavily-subsidised price – four days’ worth of hotel accommodation, evening meals, travel costs and entrance tickets in China’s capital for roughly £350. Although Shanghai is only a four-hour bullet train journey from Beijing, I was taken aback by the differences between the two capitals. Beijing has a much older, more traditional feel to it, evidenced in historical sites like the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, and of course the Great Wall. The university organised a tour guide to take us around all these sites, ensuring we had the best information about the history of each location. The only problem was that this was during the height of summer – on the day we visited the Forbidden City, temperatures reached 38°C! But that was a minor drawback to an incredible few days.

The main thing I enjoyed about the course was how international it was. In my language classes of twenty students, I was the only student from Europe, and there were only five other native English speakers. The rest of the class were from many other countries, most commonly South Korea and Japan. Given that some of the other students felt anxious about their English skills, this meant that most of the time the only common language we had was Chinese. This not only let us practise our Chinese more, but also gave me an insight into wider uses for my language skills that I had not encountered before. There was something really exciting about going to meals with my classmates and realising that we had become friends using only Chinese to communicate.

Overall, I had a wonderful summer. I learned so much over the month, and definitely felt more comfortable using my Chinese everyday by the time my second-year course began in Beijing. All of this was possible with the generous support of the travel grant, so thank you, Pembroke!
The view from my dorm window of the East China Normal University campus

The Yu Gardens, Shanghai
The traditional water town, Zhujiajiao, near the Shanghai suburbs

My coursemates and I outside the Temple of Heaven, Beijing