

Personal Report

Program:	Student Exchange
Home University:	Karl-Ruprecht-Universität Heidelberg, Germany
Exchange University	Tsinghua University Beijing, China
Exchange period:	September 2013 - June 2014
Creation date:	June 2014

Life at Tsinghua University in Beijing

1 Introduction

I study physics at the University of Heidelberg in Heidelberg, Germany. I was an exchange student at Tsinghua University in Beijing for the 2013/2014 academic year. My goals for studying in China were to 1) improve my language skills, 2) learn as much about China as possible and 3) become familiar with the Chinese higher education system.

2 Preparation

Former Heidelberg-Tsinghua exchange students have described pre-arrival preparation and organization in detail, so the main part of my preparation for the semester involved Chinese language.

My parents migrated from China to Germany before I was born, so I grew up speaking Chinese at home and attended Saturday Chinese language school. But my reading skills never reached a level where I was able to read the newspaper. I stopped learning Chinese during high school and university and have therefore forgotten a lot. I knew that if I did not go to China, I would eventually forget all of the characters that I learned as a child. After being accepted to the Tsinghua Exchange program, I only then began to re-learn Chinese. I do not recommend this to students with no Chinese language background. I was lucky that our university has an Institute for Sinology where I attended two language courses. Both courses were for students in their third or fourth year of Chinese language study. In this environment, I not only improved my Chinese a great deal but also learned about another department at my university. Before I left for Tsinghua, my perspective and horizon were already being widened; until these classes, I had had little contact with social science students.

Because of my family background, I visited Shanghai for short visits every few years while I was growing up. These trips prepared me for what to expect in China. Yet upon arrival in Beijing, I still experienced culture shock—and not all of the shock was good. For anyone who has never been to China before, all aspects of life feel different than at home in the West. China also reveals itself slowly to foreigners. The longer you stay in China the more layers and subtleties you begin to see.

3 Every Beginning Is Difficult . . .

I arrived relatively late in Beijing so I was quite busy during the first days to settle all of my organization matters. Very few university administrators can speak any English (so having a Chinese-speaking friend with you to help is more than convenient).

My first stop at Tsinghua was the General Service Desk in Zijing Apartment Building No. 19 to register for my dorm room. The service desk is usually open 24/7, and some people were able to move in before the registration dates if they wanted to arrive in Beijing early. Exchange students must pay for the whole semester's rent upon arrival, but apart from this, all I needed to do was sign the rental agreement and get my keys. It was important, however, to keep track of all of the receipts and paperwork. When I got to my room, I was slightly disappointed with the state of the bathroom's tiles, sink and drainage along with the bedroom flooring. The furniture, however, was suitable. I only came to China with one suitcase so I was able to fit all of my belongings into the provided storage space. The room comes with a water boiler, because the tap water is not potable. I would cool the boiled water for drinking water, but buying a water tank was also an option.

After dropping off my luggage in my room, I went to the International Students Office in Zijing Apartment Building No. 22. International students must register themselves here about half a week before lectures begin. The registration included: confirming personal data on an online application, registering for a Health Certificate and Residence Permit and conforming that you have health insurance. You need a Chinese name to complete the process. If you do not already have a Chinese name, the administrator or teacher will create a new Chinese name for you on the spot. If you want an elegant Chinese name then you should prepare one in advance. At registration there were volunteer students who could speak English and were very helpful. Registration was also a great opportunity to begin meeting other international students.

After registration there were two more important arrival procedures: 1) residence permit (for those staying in China for a whole year) and 2) a "card marathon". The card marathon was essentially running around the campus and trying to find the right places to get:

- Canteen Card: the dining card office is hard to find. It is best to ask others for the way. The office also has unusually short office hours. You must not come too late, but you also need to come before or after their 2-hour lunch break. The staff only grant the canteen card to students if they have their admission notice.
- Washing Card: You can buy and recharge the washing card at the General Service Desk in Building No. 19. To start the washing machine just swipe the washing card onto a digital sensor on the machine.
- Bank Card: A Chinese bank account is not necessary (except to receive Chinese scholarship money). I needed to open an account, because my parents transferred me money from Chinese bank accounts. Be prepared that you have to draw a number and wait in line for up to 3 hours to receive any service at the Bank of China branch on-campus.
- SIM Card: There are prepaid cell phone cards and contracts, but prepaid cards usually have a minimum top-up value per month. In China there are 3 major networks and not every SIM card or phone is compatible with every network. You can get a SIM card for free (special advertisement campaigns or banks) or cheaply (at kiosks and little shops). Official SIM cards have to be registered to your passport at an official network provider branch.
- Student Card: The Tsinghua administration announced a student photo date for student cards. Students must attend to get their student card on that exact day. Students in non-degree programs get a campus card and a passport-like document.

4 University

Students have a two week period at the beginning of the semester to add and drop classes. During this period I visited and dropped a lot of different courses and then finalized my final course list.

Since the Tsinghua Physics Department did not offer any courses taught in English, I ended up only taking one Physics course each semester: Solid State Physics 2 in autumn and Particle Physics in spring. Although I would regard the niveau of the courses as definitely lower than in Heidelberg, they were very challenging for me, for instance because I did not study Solid State Physics 1. For Solid state Physics we had English and Chinese textbooks. When I started reading the Chinese textbook, it took me one hour to read one page, because I had to look up so many characters. My Chinese did improve a lot through this process, however, and it felt good to actually use the language rather than just studying it in a classroom setting. In both courses the teachers kindly provided me with English exams and in Particle Physics I could also hand in my homework in English.

Apart from these Physics class, I enrolled in different Chinese language classes, which were all very good. From my experience and what I have heard, I would say that the quality of Tsinghua's and other Chinese universities' Chinese language courses is very good. If you want to make big improvements in your Chinese, a stay at a Chinese university will probably help.

5 Big Brother and Big Sister

Big Brother and Big Sister is a project of the volunteering organisation BEAM (Bridging Education and Mobility), which supports educational projects in rural and migrant schools. Volunteering Bigs, local and international university-students or young professionals, are paired to Littles, migrant students at the age of primary school, as a guide in learning English and developing their own personality.

Here the word "migrant" refers to Chinese citizens living in Beijing but not holding Beijing residence (which is presumably harder to get than German citizenship). Since migrant students are not allowed to go to ordinary Beijing schools and usually have parents with long working hours, they enjoy inferior education both in school and at home.

I heard about the Big Brother and Big Sister project via a volunteering organisation of Tsinghua and applied to become a volunteer. There was an informal interview, mainly to check your interest and motivation for this project. Then after a preparation and get-to-know meeting with all other volunteers we met our Littles every Saturday for one hour of teaching English and one hour of doing workshops. The project lasted 12 weeks and the meetings were located at a primary school in Beijing suburb about an hour by bus from Tsinghua.

Through this project I learned more about life in Beijing outside campus. Also I got to know people studying at other universities in Beijing. Unfortunately this project was only launched a year ago and is still not organised very well. So although I enjoyed my commitment into this project, I did not continue this project in spring semester.

6 Hiking Student Association: Braveheart

At the beginning of the semester there is a fair at Tsinghua where all student associations present themselves and recruit new members. I looked for sports associations and was also interested to see more of China's nature, so the hiking club seemed attractive to me. Moreover the guy from Braveheart I talked to was very kind and helpful, which convinced me to join this club. For me the best part of this association was that all members were Chinese students.

During the semester Braveheart offers fitness training everyday and weekend trips. Unfortunately I could not join any of the hiking trips in the autumn semester because of my volunteering on Saturdays. Thus I regularly participated in the trainings. At the beginning I was quite surprised at the military-like style.

The highlight of the autumn semester was an ice climbing event in January which was preceded by four weeks of so called winter training: outdoor fitness training on every weekday evening and speeches on techniques at the weekends. Sufficient participation in the training including an endurance test was required to subscribe for the ice climbing trip. Since it was the only winter for me in Tsinghua I was very ambitious to join the trip but at the same time I really enjoyed the trainings. Seeing each other every day led to a sense of community. Finally the three-day ice climbing trip to a mountain in Beijing district rounded off my autumn semester at Tsinghua.

The counterpart of the spring semester was a hiking trip to Amne Machin mountain range which is located in different Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures of Qinghai district. In Tibetan Buddhism Amne Machin is considered sacred and the a place of pilgrimage. The clockwise circumambulation of the massif is an important ritual and affiliated with religious merit. We not only experienced the trek ourselves but also studied the cultural aspects of this pilgrimage. Our hiking route had a total length of about 100km which we walked in 7 days. The altitude of around 4000m made it a very difficult trek, especially with the weight of all the equipment. On our journey we met several pilgrims and interviewed them, visited local administration offices as well as monasteries and schools. The whole journey was very exhausting but a unique experience to me.

Cultural Differences

When experiencing the culture differences to China, the differences among European countries, North and South America become negligible. Therefore, the term "Western" makes sense indeed and I will use it very often here.

However, China is a big country: Chinese culture is the culture of more than 50 ethnic groups, Chinese landscape is the landscape of multiple climate zones leading to very different ways of life.

7 Language

Language is one of the most obvious differences between people of different cultural milieus. Speaking different languages hinders verbal communication and each others understanding. Therefore learning a language, especially at a higher level, is deeply connected to understanding another culture in all its aspects. I firstly encountered this problem with Chinese because there is a significant cultural gap. When I learned English and stayed in England, I never had such feelings.

7.1 Translation

The main problem of translations between Chinese and German or English is, that often it is not possible to express a meaning correctly.

Firstly, the translation of a word might give an implicit connotation to it which did not exist in the original language. For instance the German word "Führer" (leader) is nowadays always related to the Nazi regime and cannot be used with its original meaning anymore. However, the social structure in China requires the usage of the word "leader" much more often which is hard to express properly in German. Another example is the word "bean". For some reason, Germans often give a negative connotation to it, whereas in Chinese it is a neutral word. So if you tell a German that there are beans in his food, his face will tell you that he is associating this with something not appetizing. The next step is to remind him that chocolate is also made of beans, so that he still tries the food. No matter if he likes it or not, the point is that every word causes an association in our mind which is deeply correlated with our own language and culture.

Secondly, we have to deal with a lack of words or a different contingent on phrases. As English and German are both Germanic languages, most expressions can be directly translated between them. This makes it easy

to translate sentences word by word and to learn the other language quickly. However, Chinese is a completely different language compared to all letter-written, grammar-intensive languages. Thus, the translation between Chinese and English/German requires paraphrasing and a translation by meaning. Problems arise since often a conception, attitude or reason does not exist in the other culture and there are no words and phrases for it. So for example, a Chinese person would say that because he has 上火 he is not eating Lychees today. 上火 is a concept of Chinese medicine, so this one word in Chinese expresses a whole idea. If you do not know the concept, talking half an hour about Chinese medicine will still not make you fully understand his reasons and beliefs for not eating Lichees today.

A third problem occurs, when the same word is used in both languages but is understood differently. Easy examples are names for food like “sausage”. Firstly, the word “sausage” in Chinese describes anything that has the shape of a sausage. Secondly, although nowadays sausages made of meat are common snack in China, their taste totally different to German sausages. So saying the word “sausage” will create a completely different imagination in a Chinese and a German person.

7.2 Influence on the Way of Thinking

In my opinion a language has deep impact on your way of thinking, it is the infrastructure for your streams of thoughts. Since every language has specific sayings and misses certain expressions, our mind and opinion is shaped by our language.

Chinese is a language with very few different sounds. About 400 different syllables in 4 tones correspond to 3000 to 5000 characters you need in your everyday life.

The ambiguity of the sound of a syllable influences the Chinese mind. Then and now it is common to make connections between words which sound the same or similar. For instance traditionally, the dinner on Chinese New Years Eve must not miss some fish because the word 鱼 (fish) has exactly the same sound as 余, which means to have something remaining. Thus the saying 年年有余 (to have a surplus every year) is symbolized by 年年有鱼 (to eat fish every year). Nowadays, similar correlations are made. For instance, in China it is common to give apples as a present for Christmas. The reason is that the first syllable in apple (苹果) has the same sound as the first syllable in the translation of Christmas Eve (平安夜). Further, I also recognized that our humour is influenced by our language and culture. Chinese people seem to make much more linguistic jokes than we do.

The other big difference between Chinese and German or English is that the former is based on graphic characters while the latter use letters of the alphabet. I noticed that this is a fundamental difference in our mind. So although my Spanish skills are far worse than my Chinese, reading a Spanish text still seems less deterring. Our education makes us focus on our script. While we use a “T” to describe the T-junction, Chinese people use the character 丁 and say 丁字路口 (“丁-character crossing”). Although we can easily learn these expressions, the crucial difference lies in the fact that our brain makes a different first association. That became evident to me, when I learned that even more complicated geometrical forms are labelled or expressed by Chinese characters. For instance, I saw models of different roof architectures in a museum. Thereby Chinese characters similar to the forms of the roofs were used as name givers. Another funny example is counting. While we symbolize five by something like |||| the analogue in Chinese is the character 五 which has exactly five strokes.

Furthermore, one has to note that the grammatical structure of a language is an important framework for every expression. In Chinese words are not differentiated by tense and grammatical gender, i.e. there is no declination, conjugation or singular and plural. One only speaks in infinitives and with the help of adverbials. Thus, every statement is somehow absolute and not restricted for a certain time frame. Thinking this way must also have a deep impact on your mind.

8 Education

It is clear to everyone that there is a difference between the education systems of every country, but in my opinion it is possible to divide them into the two major classes East and West. I had many prejudices against the Chinese education system. Although many of them turned out to be true, my stay in China allowed me to gain a little deeper insight.

8.1 Chinese Language Courses

In our language courses in China the difference between Chinese and German or English became evident in another aspect: Chinese is taught and studied in another way than our languages. Since Chinese has no grammar in our sense, we do not need to study tenses, conjunction, declination, subjunctive etcetera. Instead

the meaning of a word has priority, including the difference to synonyms, the origin of a word and its implicit judgement. Although I did not have such problems, I know that many other international student found it very hard to assimilate to the style of teaching Chinese here.

However, of course I encountered difficulties while studying Chinese. For instance, I found it hard to learn words like 难为 (nánwéi) and 为难 (wéinán), which have only very slight difference in their meaning and are just the same characters in opposite order. Also Chinese sentences do not necessarily have a predicate and a subject what confuses me.

8.2 Textbooks

When I was a child, I already noticed the difference between the texts in Chinese and English or German lecture books. But at that time I did not recognize it as a cultural difference or a difference in the way of education. Instead I just strongly disliked all texts in my Chinese textbook and thought they were nonsense. In retrospect it shows me how elementary and wide-ranging the difference in our education is.

8.3 Moral Education

In general, Chinese people have much space for improving their morals. Some foreigners say that they have never been to a country where people are so unfriendly. But this is not only what you observe as a foreigner. Many Chinese people state that the moral sense in China is very low and that good conscience is not existing in peoples mind yet.

One reason is that the average education level in China as a developing country is lower than in an industrialized country. This becomes evident when you travel to rural areas or less developed parts of China, where people do not have access to a better education. At these places it is observable that the behaviour of the people is worse than in the bigger cities.

One very eye-catching way of moral education in China is questionable to me. There are prompts and calls asking you for well behaviour everywhere: on big posters or signs at bus stops or tube stations, written on all the walls hiding the constructions sides, on banners hanging at street crossings, on stickers in bathrooms, repeated in automatic announcement in train stations, etcetera etcetera. But it seems to me that this method is not successful to educate your citizens to better behaviour. Unfortunately, this also implies that all the posters advertising environment protection will not arise any ecological awareness in the people.

There are many things which people do not do. But this is only because our education taught us not to do so. Once I was in a park and it started to rain. I saw a father who bought his son a raincoat. When he unpacked the raincoat, he just through the plastic packing on the ground as if this was the most normal thing in the world. His behaviour showed me that it indeed was normal for him, and therefore also for his son. Similar occasions were not rare. Children are not taught environmental awareness, because parents have not been either. In such a society it is hard to make the beginning. China still has a long way to go.

9 Social Norms and Values

The norms and values of a society influence our everyday life, sometimes more, sometimes less. In China I often encountered situations in which I could see that the social norms and the resulting social expectations are different than in the West.

9.1 Clothing

At first sight it is clear that the clothing style in China is different to the fashion in Western countries. But it is also different from other Asian countries like Korea or Japan. In China, clothing can be very casual. Some of my friends always wear sweatpants all day long which means also in their lab or office. Also you might meet Chinese people wearing their pyjama when they go to buy their breakfast. In accordance, the business clothing is more casual than in other countries. Suits are not necessary for business meetings, jeans with shirt are usually more than enough.

More interesting is the fact that I noticed how my environment influenced me. Slowly I got used to the Chinese clothing style. What I had found unacceptable and strange at the beginning, became normal and I even started to like some of it. Apart from limited luggage for my journey home, this is one of the reasons why I did not want to buy too many clothes in China before I am going back to Germany. I would probably not wear them back home.

9.2 Hygiene

Cleanliness requirements in China are far lower than in Germany, that is for all types of hygiene. So my conclusion is that hygiene has a lower priority than in my home country.

The most obvious aspect is the cleanliness of streets, buildings and furnished rooms. Although I am still annoyed now or then, I got used to this kind of low hygiene standard. Especially the public toilets and the dirty tables in the canteen are no problem anymore. What gets on my nerves is either the low quality or the non-rational construction of buildings and their furnishing such that it is impossible to make them really clean at all.

Another issue is body hygiene. Chinese people definitely have an advantage because most of them do not sweat as much and as odour as Western people. However, having a shower every day and brushing your teeth twice a day do not seem to be strict rules. Probably staying until 11 pm in the lab and only having warm water between 5 pm and 11 pm makes it more difficult to shower every day. It is also accepted to wear the same cloth several days in a row or to wear your sports clothes all day long. Especially because the bachelor students need to go jogging in the morning, they tend to wear their sports trousers all day. In the hiking club I joined we would always dine together directly after the training or a hike. On the contrary, during the training camps in Germany we always had to change to normal clothes for having lunch or dinner. This shows the varied standpoints.

9.3 Environment

Your living environment has a huge impact on your behaviour. The best example is traffic, where you quickly adapt to your surrounding. In China, similar to other countries in South-East Asia, traffic is just the result of everyone making his own way without hurting someone else but also without any system at a higher order. So here I would also use the cycleway on the wrong side, neglect red traffic lights where possible and cross a road as soon as enough pedestrians are gathered together. But I am sure that once back in Germany I will obey all traffic laws again, maybe even stricter than I did before I came to China because I appreciate a functioning traffic system much more now and want to contribute my part to sustain it.

However, traffic is just one example. Other aspects may have less impact or need more time. Even after a year here, some Chinese attitudes and habits still are in contradiction to my own. But they do not seem as strange and as unacceptable as at the beginning of my stay here. Only this exchange year here showed me to what extent your surrounding is influencing you.

9.4 Eating Habits

Food is another very important part of culture. Chinese people recognize and emphasize themselves how important their food is to them. For other cultures I have the feeling that we are not aware of how important our eating habits are to us.

Chinese cuisine is more diverse than German cuisine. There are many many kinds of ingredients, especially fruits and vegetables, were I had to tell my Chinese friends that we do not have them in Germany. For Chinese readers, examples are 荔枝, 紫薯, 山药, 竹笋, 白夜, 苦瓜, 榴莲, 香瓜, 桑葚, 杨梅, 花椒, 蒜苗, 油麦菜, 茼蒿菜, 金桔. But if they asked what we have but China does not have, I needed to think hard and could only come up with a few things, like white asparagus, wholewheat bread and of course all milk products. I noticed that for people who do not speak Chinese it is hard to discover the whole spectrum of unfamiliar vegetables and other ingredients. Because the vegetables do not exist in our countries, they often do not have a name in English or the English translation is very weird. Therefore some dishes never show up in the English menu or their name is so strange that you would not order them. For instance the translation of 香椿 is *Toona sinensis*, also called Chinese toon, leaves and stems of a tree. In English, that sounds more like biology lesson than like a tasty dish.

Further, in China it is very common and at the same time essential to go out for food. Every event is connected to dining together, thereby event refers to any kind of talk, business meeting, trip, birthday and suchlike. Along with this habit, ranking of restaurants and eateries is very widespread. You have at least one application on your phone to find the best restaurant for what you are looking for and to find out what the best dishes in this restaurant are. Also you are willed to take some efforts to eat in a good restaurant. Usually that means that you have to queue for a table. Similarly, Chinese people also have their favourite store for more basic dishes or ingredients. Buying the same thing somewhere else than at this place is unimaginably.

Talking about going out for food, it must be considered that dining in China is different than in the West. In China, people sit around a round table and share their food. For bigger tables there is a rotatable circular

panel in the middle of the table. Dishes are served on this panel which is turned so everyone can get every dish. Usually, you directly use your chopsticks to take food from the panel. The size of these tables varies. Smaller tables can fit 6 to 8 persons, a standard size would be around 10, but for special occasions there are also tables for 15 or even more persons. Thereby people are in conversation with the whole table, you just speak loud enough that also the persons sitting on the other side of the table hear you.

There is also a correct order in which the food should be served. First there are small cold dishes as appetizers. Then come warm dishes, whereby the order is appetizing soup, special dishes of the restaurant, stir-fried dishes, cooked and baked dishes, vegetables and fish. Then it follows the main soup, sweet dishes, staple food and lastly fruits. Of course the composition of all these dishes must be considered, so it is best if one person orders for everyone. Hence, in China one table always gets only one menu and not everyone his own. Ordering food in China can be seen as a skill.

Eating and drinking habits are also different that in the West. The practise to go to a bar to have some drinks does not exist in China's tradition. Instead, alcohol is only drunk during a meal. Only having drinks without food or karaoke appears boring. Also soft drinks and beer are not traditional Chinese drinks for a meal, although they are available now everywhere. In Chinese cuisine, soups play a different role than in the West. Usually soups refer to broth which fulfil the task of drinks in Western meals. Hence it is necessary for a full meal to include soup. The canteens in our university provided simple soup for free. This kind of soup has not much of taste, in other words it tastes like hot water, and can be seen as a free drink.

Lastly it should be mentioned that Chinese medicine still has a deep impact on Chinese eating habits. There are a lot of rules which people still consider. These rules mainly refer to which food can be eaten together, which should not be eaten together and to balance internal heat and cold in the body. Women mind these rules especially during their menstruation.

9.5 Interpersonal dealings

To me Chinese people often seem impolite and unfriendly, but then there are other situations where they are extremely gallant and respectful. The huge difference in the understanding of good behavior, politeness, taken-for-grantedness and tone made me often feel offended or annoyed or uneasy.

From the Western view, Chinese tone is less polite. A word like "please" as a phrase of civility does not exist in Chinese, i. e. providing service or information is taken for granted. When you hear people shouting "服务员" (waiter/waitress) in restaurants their tone sounds very bad-mannered in Western thinking. But I asked Chinese friends about their opinion and they found it very polite to say this neutral word "Fuwuyuan" in contrast to other words.

10 Interpersonal Relationships

10.1 Cultural Gap within a Family

As language can be seen as a part of culture, a language barrier can give rise to a cultural barrier within a family. Whereas I did not consider this as a reason for my stay in China, I met a guy in my Chinese class who did. His parents were Chinese but he grew up in Japan, so his mother tongue is Japanese while his parents first language is Chinese. He told me that one of his reasons for learning Chinese was that he could communicate better with his parents.

After I had stayed a semester in China, I also noticed that my improved abilities in Chinese allowed a better understanding between me and my parents. Although both my parents live in Germany since more than 20 years, I have the feeling that their mind still works quicker and better in Chinese. Besides I am also able to communicate properly with the rest of our family in China now, what makes me very happy. So in hindsight, I would regard my family background as an important reason for my stay in China.

But despite language there are other impacts which cause a cultural difference between me and my parents. Some fundamental principles and ways of educating your children are definitely different no matter how long you stay in another country. This does not always have to be considered as positive or negative. The key point is that the difference exists and that it is more difficult to understand each other.

10.2 Friends

I found it very hard to make friends with Chinese persons but at the end I got to know some awesome people who I would call my friends now and who I will miss when I leave China.

Apart from language, there are several more difficulties which make it more complicated to find Chinese friends in China.

Firstly, as an international student one does not get to know many Chinese students. There are special dormitories for foreign students and of course there are no Chinese students in our language courses. But also in my physics courses I was not able to establish any friendship to my classmates.

Thus secondly, the situation of the Chinese students you meet has to be considered. As the students in my courses were usually in their 3rd or 4th year, they obviously already had a lot of friends were not looking for new contacts in their classes.

Thirdly, making friends works differently in China than in our cultures. Chinese students are part of a organisational structure which does not include internationals. For instance they still have classes in university and there are quite a few activities which are held with your class. Also many Chinese students I met were very good friends with their roommates or classmates. So structures like these give them possibilities to find friends.

A fourth aspect is the very different lifestyle. Many exchange students use their exchange year to gain a lot of experiences and do not concentrate that much on their studies, whereas the Chinese students being at their home university obviously have a tighter schedule in terms of studies. Therefore they cannot join all the activities which you do as an exchange students and often it is hard to meet them more than once a week for a meal. Apart from that, also the lifestyle of a Chinese student is different from the lifestyle of a German student. Finding a common sense is more difficult then.

Last but not least it must be considered, that it is always more difficult to make good friends with someone who has a completely different cultural background. Many occasions can be interpreted differently, leading to misunderstandings and making it hard to confide in each other. But the whole process was a very intense experience with a lot of up and downs.

I met all the friends I finally found in China in students associations. Joining the same association lays a good foundation because it guarantees that you have some similar interests. I made me very happy to recognize similarities to Chinese adolescents, especially where I had not expected it. For instance, I never thought that Chinese teenagers also play werewolf.

10.3 Love Relationships

Of course in China there is also a different set of rules and expectations for a romantic relationship. I was in a relationship during my time in China, so I did not experience any romantic relationship myself. But one of my German friends found a Chinese partner and said that he found it a very enriching experience to be in a relationship with someone from another culture. I could imagine that in such a close relationship many situations occur where your cultural background influences your opinion. Further, there are a few couples amongst my Chinese friends here and they surely behave different than couples in our societies.

In general I would say that in China love relationships there exist more stereotypically role models of a strong guy and a girl to be taken care of. On the one hand, there are very obvious manners which are different to ours. Chinese guys take their girlfriends on the bicycle rack very often. They also carry her handbag. Sometimes Chinese guys have to be kind of a gentle butler for their girlfriend, I think.

The socio-cultural rules and the expectations of your environment require a certain behaviour between boyfriend and girlfriend. For instance, if a couple is together with other friends and one of them says or does something, then the rest of the group will have certain expectations of the partner which he or she will need to fulfil.

10.4 Social position

The social hierarchy is much more pronounced in China than in Western countries. People in general are more obedient and follow intructions straightaway whereas I wondered about the reasons for a lot of rules.

At university teachers give weight to their social status compared to the position of a student. I did not directly experience this in my lectures. But the professors of some courses were not very good at teaching and although there was no attendance all students would still go to every lesson. Further I heard from both Chinese and international students that supervising professors enhance in their tone and behavior that they have a higher position.

Also in the fitness training of the hiking club I was quite surprised of the tone. It seemed like military training, the coach would give strict instructions and they had to be followed. The training plan could not be changed, not even with regard to the students attendant. As I have many years of coaching experience myself and completed a coaching certificate, it was weird to see them attaching more importance to a strict training procedure than to the correct performance of exercises.

11 Political Issues

At the beginning I had the very Western attitude where I could not understand why Chinese citizens would not feel somehow suppressed and belied to by the Chinese government. But after I had discussions with different people and gained more insight to the living situation in China, I noticed that political system is tightly related to history, education and social environment. Since all of these aspects are understood differently in China than in the West, the more familiar I get with Chinese culture the more disputes I recognize. Here I only want to point out some aspects which made me reflect my former point of view.

11.1 Human Rights

I grew up in a society where human rights are taken as the most fundamental principle for a progressive civilisation. Without defining human rights here closer, I just want to take them as fundamental rights which in my view should be granted to every human being by birth. But in China I learned that this is not considered to be first priority everywhere.

I can understand that human rights are not regarded as most important for people in a developing country. Especially if a lack of existential living conditions exists, these rights seem to be far less important than the maintenance of your family. Many Chinese citizens would have thoughts similar to these. However, a lot of people in China live above subsistence level or even at a luxury level. But still human rights are not regarded as very important for a country. This contradicts to my opinion that the protection of human rights is basic to build a stable society and should also be taken into account in developing countries.

11.2 Democracy

Without going into details, I would naively say that the most of the developed countries nowadays have functioning democratic political systems. When I was a child, I always thought many problems in China could be solved by changing the political system to a democracy. But after my stay in China I noticed that this is not true. In the Chinese society as it is now, a democracy would not work out.

The mind of people in the East and in the West seems to be fundamentally different. Looking at other Asian countries, most of them tend to be effectively illiberal and authoritative political systems. China is only one of these countries. The lack of political participation and freedom is a very severe problem in a Western point of view but it is not as fatal for an Asian society. For instance, my stepmum moved to Germany from China only one year ago. She told me that before she came to Germany she never knew what democracy really meant. How can you miss something which you do not even know? Chinese culture and education is different, therefore their image of humanity and their needs are different. What we regard as important does not necessarily also be the most important aspect for them. If we suffer under the Chinese system, it is incorrectly to assume that the Chinese do it in the same way.

But at the same time, the large amount of people migrating from China to Western countries shows that people do like other political systems once they get to know them.

11.3 Minorities

China is a diverse country with 55 ethnic minorities. This is a fact that everyone in China is well aware of. Abroad, mainly the troubles in Xinjiang and Tibet are known. But before, I would have passed all responsibility for the problems to the Chinese government.

During my studies here I learned that not only the Chinese government must be blamed for the conflicts with the minorities in China. As far as I experienced it, Chinese people are very affected to their own culture, including especially habits, food and lifestyle. These things fundamentally necessary to their life and they have problems to miss them. Thus, in Canada for instance in bigger cities more or less everything in terms of Chinese food is available now. Further, in parks in Malaysia and the Philippines you meet Chinese old people dancing and practising tai chi just like in China. I think that Chinese people like to bring their own culture to wherever they move. In my opinion this is another important issue in terms of critical regions as Xinjiang and Tibet. When Chinese people move to these regions, they spread their own culture instead of adapting and assimilating to the local culture. Since these parts of China are Islamic, the cultural differences are huge and a lack of respect and interest in the local culture is surely another reason for conflicts.

12 Operating Principles and the Way of Thinking

12.1 Attitude towards the West

In general, Chinese people are very interested in the Western culture. This has positive and negative aspects. In the contrary, in the West China has become more interesting only recently, or more precisely along with its economic growth.

In some aspects, Chinese people admire the Western culture and a Western lifestyle is considered fashionable. However, copying another culture is often only very superficial. For instance, Western students often go to bars to have a beer together. Thereby the gathering is important, it means talking with each other and having fun. To save money, students would usually go to a budget bar and buy the cheapest drinks there. On the other side, I often see Chinese people going to bars and clubs, where they order expensive drinks and food. But often their faces tell that they are not really enjoying themselves.

Since China is a developing country, most of the European countries and the U.S. are seen as an example. Also, European history is taught in school. The knowledge of Chinese people about Europe surprised me again and again, since they often knew more facts than I did. Further I was surprised what a fair impression Germany has in China. Most people have a very high opinion of Germany and admire our goods as well as our system.

12.2 Responsibility, Freedom and Efficiency

When I was 14 years old, I was taught in school that freedom is always related to responsibility. Since then, many occasions in my life have consolidated this statement to me.

My education in Germany was focused on responsible and self-determined behaviour, critical and interrelated thinking. My high school states: "Ziel unseres umfassenden Bildungskonzeptes ist es, unsere Schülerinnen und Schüler zu Persönlichkeiten heranzubilden, die bereit und in hohem Maße dazu in der Lage sind, in unserer Gesellschaft Verantwortung zu übernehmen." (The aim of our educational concept is that our students become personalities who are able to take responsibility in our society.) Only in China I noticed how much freedom I am used to and that I had accepted some responsibility at a young age.

Here it is necessary to examine our conception of responsibility. It is not to say that Chinese students do not shoulder responsibility, but they surely do not take over responsibility in the Western sense. In China, responsibilities are allocated very accurate what leads to a high efficiency. For example, there is always a leader, let it be the captain of a team, group leader of a work group, the boss of a department or the like. The leader will assign his team members with a specific task, which then becomes this member's responsibility. In terms of the leader, usually his decisions are not to be questioned and his instructions to be followed. The absence of discussions leads to a quick execution. It is also very convenient for all team members since they only need to worry about their own specific area of responsibility and do not need to care about anything else. The leader is essential in this structure since he plays the key role and all team members are glad to have someone caring about everything. One might notice the similarity to structure of the political system in China.

However, I had the impression that it becomes very problematic if a task or a responsibility is not assigned to a particular person. Because in this case, no one wants to take over this part of responsibility and be in charge for it. Then a irrational process of spreading responsibilities to so many persons starts and goes on until no one can be put into charge any more.

The essential status difference between leader and members leads to a different reasoning. The main problem about coming late is that this will offend your leader. A formal excuse is more important than rework the missed section.

Although we all strive for high efficiency, our understanding of efficiency seems to be different. Thus, Chinese workers often appear to be very inefficient to us. But Chinese students also told me about situations abroad, where they found Western workers very inefficient. This problem is similar to asking what is worth to spend time, money and effort. Since the answer is surely different for Eastern and Western persons, the way of working, which is regarded as efficient, is also different.

Another aspect in terms of responsibility seems to be connected to the social structure of China. As China has a lot of cheap workers, the society is based on them. Many things which would be regarded as the responsibility of every single person in Germany are given to staff here. For example, there is a huge amount of cleaning staff in buildings as well as for public areas. If you throw rubbish on the road, there is someone to

clean it immediately. Also tablets in McDonalds or restaurant of this kind are cleared away by the staff rather than by the customers. I often have the feeling that the responsibility for small things are forgotten and I do not like the feeling that someone else in the society has to clean after me only because I had been to lazy.

12.3 Equality and Discrimination

The value of one person in China is not as high as in our conception of the human being. In other words you can say that a person is nothing valuable in China. There are so many people that one person is just not very important. One reason might be that China has been a country with a high population since a very long time.

In the Western education and culture one of the most fundamental beliefs is that all humans are equal, i.e. that all persons should have the same rights and opportunities and should be treated equally. Here in China I was confronted with a different opinion. People from different countries are not the same. They have different appearance, they have different culture. If their outside looking and behaviour is different, surely their inside is also different. They must have a different mentality and reasoning. To conclude, humans from different places are different. So if they are different, why should they be treated the same?

In China a lot of phenomena would be regarded as discrimination in my opinion. But here it is totally normal. For instance, China has a residence registration system which has more the features of an internal nationality. Social welfare, pension and education are connected to the residence card. Residence registrations of cities with good social services, e.g. Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, are restricted and very difficult to obtain. Because moving to another place does not automatically change your residence registration, there is a difference between the people living in the same place since they are from different areas. These differences are various. Children holding residence of another place are not allowed to go to the same schools, thus they have a disadvantage in their education and for their future. Also foreigners are not allowed to go to normal Chinese schools. In my opinion, this is the reasons why there are no ethnically non-Chinese persons who grew up in China and became Chinese in a way how I became German. In contrast, in Germany nobody is surprised if a Asian-looking persons speaks German as native language and is culturally completely German. Of course in China it also must be considered that there are so few foreigners such that foreigners are always clearly distinguished as foreigners.

This leads to the question whether it is better to be a Chinese looking foreigner or a genuine foreigner. Both have pros and cons, but since I am ethnically Chinese I will only refer to this case.

My biggest advantage were my language abilities, especially that I could speak Chinese without a foreign accent. This allowed me to make Chinese friends easier. However, I think that looking Chinese is also very important to be integrated in the Chinese society. For instance, the children of my professor, who are half Chinese half American and grew up in China, were treated differently by their classmates because of their outside looking.

The disadvantage of looking Chinese is being treated as a Chinese person. This can be very impolite and rude in the Western view and hurts your feelings at the beginning. However, you can experience China less sophisticated and get the whole picture. Another problem is that I encountered several embarrassing situations because I did not know something every child should know – if it was grown in China.

12.4 Planning

It was very difficult for me to deal with the short-term preplanning in China, especially compared to the very well-planned German culture. Whereas we can look up semester dates for the next three years, Tsinghua does not fix registration dates for the next semester earlier than at the end of the ongoing semester. Dates concerning issues of university or dormitory usually are set about one or two month in advance. This really annoyed me because I could not plan my holidays earlier and prices of international flights often grew.

Also the student associations often inform you very spontaneously about activities. The hiking club I joined would rarely fix dates more than two weeks in advance. Also it happened quite frequently that I got an email inviting me to some event tomorrow or in less than a week. The same applies to talks and other events at the university. If Making an appointment more than a day ahead will require a precise coordination of time and place shortly before the actual appointment.

My main problem was that you could never make an appointment because some other meeting could be scheduled for this time slot. The whole coordination works in China because everyone is assumed to be available all time. In Germany on the contrary, we clearly separate our working hours from our leisure time, i.e. we are not available after finishing time. But this is unthinkable in China. If you boss calls you, you have to hop, no matter what time it is.

The difference in time periods can also be displayed by comparing how far in advance tickets are booked: In China sale of train tickets starts 20 days in advance whereas in Germany it is three months.

13 Résumé

During this year as an exchange student in China I gained varied experience which I surely would not have with a stay in a Western country. I was confronted with situations which made me reflect my former attitudes towards many different aspects in life. There were periods where I could imagine to come to China again for another couple of years, but also times when I was really looking forward to leave and not coming again. The most important thing I learned here is to become aware of different ways of thinking.

My progress in Chinese language is the main reason why I liked my stay here so much. Firstly, it enabled me to make conversation with other Chinese students about interesting topics, such as the view of society or politics, to talk about personal issues and to have amusing talks. I liked to discuss all kind of affairs, which I wondered about or put into question, with several Chinese friends here to hear different opinions. But although I can understand China much better now than before, I still have only very superficial knowledge.

Understanding China better helped me to overlook all the aspects I do not like in China. Some I got used to, some I adopted, some I accepted and some not. But if you asked me to raise my children in China, I would deny. China is a developing country and is facing many problems. For me, the problems themselves are not the main reason to refuse to live in China. Rather is it the system in which it is very difficult to level criticism and to establish reforms.