Experience of Exchange Semester in Peking University, Beijing

Peking University is one of the most prestigious schools in China established in 1898. Many university-ranking systems include *Beida* 北大to the fifty best universities of the world. Unsurprisingly, when you go to study there, the feeling of being in one of the best schools in Asia is going to be present. When talking to *Beida* students be aware that might be the future leaders of China. For this reason, networking is very important, use the opportunity to make as many friends as you can, share your ideas, projects, and dreams, go to have coffee in Paradiso Coffee shop or just stroll around the campus.

*Beida* has a decent platform to get in touch with Chinese student, particularly sports and activities clubs. There are more than 100 different activities from mountain climbing to tea drinking that one can join, often for free. During the first weeks of September pay attention to the clubs fair and just sign up. Even if your Chinese is not so good, one does not need to be fluent to do *wushu*武術and this is a good way to make new friends. Here is the website in Chinese: http://pku.edu.cn/campuslife/xsst/index.htm. (just in case the webpage is not working google 北大学生社团).

But let's take a step back from the social activities to the studies. Whether you go to China to improve your Chinese or study a particular subject, you have to take everything that the school offers you and *Beida* offers a lot. So let's start with Chinese language learning. Chinese universities have a strange system that one needs to choose whether he is going to learn the language or to attend classes in Chinese or English within different departments. So basically you have to choose only one department where you belong. Officially it means that one cannot learn the Chinese language as a subject in the School of Chinese as a Second Language and then attend additional lectures offered by different departments. But you can be smart. If your Chinese level is intermediate, I recommend you officially to join the School of Chinese as a Second Language. However, the good part is you can audit other classes unofficially or pángtīng旁听, as Chinese would say it. If one wants to study in a different department than School of Chinese as a Second Language, Chinese language proficiency exam is mandatory. The level of this Chinese exam varies between HSK 5 and HSK 6, so even if your Chinese is around HSK 5, it is doable. However, pay attention that there might be problems during the classes as teachers come from various places in China and they are going to be orientated more to Chinese students not the foreigners. My point here is that they will not talk easy Putonghua but really use academic jargon. So be true in evaluating your Chinese listening and comprehensive skills and choose wisely. Be true to yourself is smart also then taking Chinese proficiency exam to determine your Chinese level. In *Beida* professors allow you to choose your level without any grammar test. So even if your Chinese, for example, is B2, you can technically decide to go to C2 language classes. Pay attention that after you have been placed in courses, it is really a challenge to change your Chinese classes level. So again be honest with yourself and do not try to jump over your head.

If you will go to advanced Chinese level or 高级gāojí, your activities will be grammar and spoken Chinese. Other two classes you can choose from different subjects, like novel reading, Chinese film, classical Chinese or translation. Of course, choose the class, which you think, is the most applicable. My personal recommendation here would be Classical Chinese. I found the method of the professor is using is very useful: you learn both classical and modern Chinese; also some stories behind characters are unlocked which helps you to comprehend the meaning behind character. Pay attention also to professors Wang Yu offered classes. He will always give you the most interesting insights on Chinese culture, history, and language.

The amount of classes and homework is decent, so you will have enough free time to enjoy big city life. But going and auditing different classes might be a good idea. Offered classes can be found online on the web pages of different departments. For exact class location and time you will need the help of departments your interested students to help you check. In *Beida* if you are not registered in the department as a student you will not be allowed to check the exact places of the classes. If culture is your thing, I would recommend classes by cultural critic professor Dai Jinhua 戴锦华. She is sort of professor superstar so for her class you have to go at least one hour earlier if you want to find a seat.

Another story for you would be if you have passed Chinese proficiency test and you are placed not in the School of Chinese as a Second Language. In this case, one piece of advice would be to check all the classes you are planning to attend on the department’s webpage before the actual class choosing time is opened. All classes are being selected via Internet platform and if you want your credits to be seen in your certificate, you must be enrolled in that particular class. *Beida* has many students so the most popular classes are being “sold out” and you will not get a place. The deadlines to register are crucial here. It is worth to wake up earlier in the morning and get to the class you are really interested in. As exchange students, we are only eligible to participate in Undergraduate students classes. So most of them are lectures graded by exams or essays. However, some of the classes are similar to German universities’ concept of seminar. For these classes you will have to prepare different projects or presentations. Requirements of the class are written in the description on the departments’ webpages.

Peking University campus is where the old Yenching University was, meaning that the story of buildings is reaching as far as 1920. American architect Talbot Hamlin designed them according to classical Chinese architecture. So the Northern-eastern part of the campus is full of traditional architecture, for example, the Boya pagoda博雅塔leaning next to No Name Lake 未名湖. Both of them became landscape symbols of the university. Closer to the West gate stands Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology, worth to take a look at the permanent exhibition of jades, potteries, and bronzes. To different cultural events university also offers cinema, music concerts and theatre plays. So as soon as you see something that grasps your attention, make sure to buy tickets quickly as usually they are sold out really quickly.

Big part of life in China and *Beida* is food. As you possibly now, people do not ask how are you doing but whether you have eaten, 吃饭了吗 chīfànle ma? There are so many dinners, restaurants, coffee shops and snacking places what it seems overwhelming first. Important here to notice is that restaurants are only open during particular hours, like breakfast 7:00 to 8:30, lunch 11:30 to 13:30 and dinner 17:00 to 19:00. Some of the restaurants serve breakfast, so if you want to eat pancakes煎饼果子jiānbing guǒzi, steamed buns包子bāozi or Chinese doughnuts油条yóutiáo for breakfast best place is 燕南Yànnán (close to international dormitory) but you have to go there before 8 AM, afterward most of the food will be sold out. For lunch, it is definitely worth it to go to勺园Sháoyuǎn，best aubergines on the campus by the Zhejiang stand. If the weather gets really polluted, and it will during the winters, Chinese traditional medicine recommends drinking sweet soup made of tremella fungus and pears冰糖银耳梨汤 Bīngtáng yín'ěr lí tang.

I have heard many vegetarians complaining that they are starving in China. Do not be afraid, student diners have many vegetarian options; just ask which dishes are meat free. The best thing for you is that there are at least five high-quality vegetarian restaurants close to the university where they serve different fakes meat and it is delicious. Just do not be afraid to lurk around Wudaokou and search for new places.

Beijing as a capital gives many opportunities outside the academic world. One of them is volunteering and internships. I, for example, have done my internship in Central Academy of Fine Arts Museum in Beijing as a curators assistant. Contacts between my professors and Academy in Beijing helped me to get a position there. So I would also recommend you to talk to your professors about possibilities for internship and I am sure they will share contacts. An important issue for an internship is documentation. If the internship is unpaid, you do not need the agreement of Peking University and can proceed with internship on your own. However, if the internship is paid, you will have to go through huge procedures of the university but it is possible for *Beida* to agree. It might take around two months to go through Peking university bureaucracy to get all the papers for your paid internship but it is worth it. Peking University also organizes job fairs where you can meet your potential place for the internship.

Volunteering is another worth doing activity to fill in your weekends or time during the vacation in China. Here is the link to check out the possibilities of volunteering <http://www.echinacities.com/Beijing/city-guide/How-To-Volunteer-in-Beijing>. *Beida* also offers volunteering possibilities in China’s rural areas but particularly for this, you have to follow the information on Peking University web pages.

Finally, Beijing offers rich cultural life, part of it you can research on webpages called Douban, link: <https://www.douban.com/>. There is all information also about more underground music events, definitely worth to check it out. As for Beijing winter you have to be prepared to experience pollution and buy a decent gas mask. No, not kidding, gas mask because when pollution particles PM 2.5 level goes above 1000 you do not want to be outside without one. Air purifier for the house called 净化器 jìnghuà qì is also useful machine to buy; considered that you can sell it just before leaving Beijing.

Beida will organize orientations days so I think you will be able to survive. But if you need any advice, feel free to contact me: jurgaraine@gmail.com.