

TRAVEL REPORT

Tsinghua University, Beijing, China



Ananda de Vos 4012828
TU Delft Faculty of Architecture

China, Beijing, Tsinghua University
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Projects and courses

Dear reader,

My name is Ananda, I followed master courses and design studios at Tsinghua University in the fall of 2015. In this report I documented my experiences and I give some advice to students who are considering or planning to study at Tsinghua as well.

Preparation

If you go abroad during the second semester, keep in mind that two second semester courses in Delft are mandatory. You can either do those before you leave in the first semester, this is what I did, or while you are abroad. The latter option might be quite inconvenient. Besides this the preparation was quite simple, information from Tsinghua on how to apply for education and accommodation was clear. After online application some documents have to be sent per post. Because it is fast and reliable I sent these per speed post. Around a month and a half before the semester starts, I received a package back with documents to apply for a visa and information of how to apply online for a room on campus. Before applying at the Visa Centre in The Hague, I needed to book a flight and a room, because a confirmed address for the first two nights was required. After all your documents are approved, you will receive a student visa after four working days. Other things I had to arrange was to apply for an extra fund instead of my public transport card, apply for an extra debit card in case one would get lost and cancel my mobile phone service. In general, reading every document more than once and noting all important dates and deadlines will ensure your preparation will go smoothly. I arrived two weeks before the semester started. These weeks I had no internet and no campus card, which was quite inconvenient since I had no access to information or campus services. I guess arriving the day before enrolment would be better.

Study Program

During the preparation I had to choose courses and make a study plan. Upon arrival however there wasn't much to choose since pretty much all courses are in Chinese. The courses that were available, for 10 Tsinghua credits, did not add up to the required amount of credits to be obtained, which is usually 12. This worried me, so I was advised to follow a Chinese language course and the Chinese studio for extra credit. Later however it turned out that this studio was less credit than the others, which worried me even more. Also after reading the contract between Tsinghua and Delft, which had been set up the semester before, I found out I had to obtain 15 Tsinghua credits, more than the other exchange students and one-third more than the credit I could attain following architecture courses. I sincerely hope this will be changed for future students, as this many courses are not even available inside the faculty and the workload is way too high. In the end I attained 13 Tsinghua credits, spending almost all my time studying and losing a lot of sleep in the second half of the semester.

The studio meetings are quite different from those in Delft. Every week all groups, usually consisting of two or three people, present a power point presentation in class. I think this is a great way of teaching, because you also learn from seeing the process of the other students. At first I did have to get used to this, I would spend a lot of time on the presentation itself. After a few weeks I became much faster at preparing presentations, a skill which I'm happy to have developed more. The courses I had to take were about urban design, a subject I would not have chosen, but the lectures were actually really interesting. I also took a Chinese language course, which I can definitely recommend. In general the staff at Tsinghua is very friendly and helpful and the quality of the courses is very good. Compared to Delft there is more freedom in choosing topics to research, certain directions to take in your design and how to communicate those. I do hope the issues around credits will be solved, otherwise I would not recommend students to study here simply because you either won't obtain full credit or you won't have much free time.

Funding

I applied for a STIR fund, which was approved right before I left. Like mentioned before, I also got extra funding by not using my public transport card. The price of living for international students in Beijing is relatively high, about the same as in Holland. I lived on campus for 80 yuan per day, which at this time is around 12 euros per day. Food on campus is relatively inexpensive, a good meal will set you back only one to two euros. I did spend a lot of money on coffee because I did most studying in the Paradiso Café in building 22. Before going to China I expected everything to be much more inexpensive than in Holland, but this is not always the case. Generally speaking most foods and drinks except for fruit, wine and western products are cheaper. Also public transportation and taking taxi's is cheaper. On campus most students have a bike, which cost around 20 euros. Partying and going out on the other hand costs around the same or more in China. Cheap goods usually have very low quality. If you want to buy products with similar quality to those in Holland, it probably costs the same.

One-time expenses

Speed post	€ 60
Visa application	€ 70
Return ticket	€ 600
Registration	€ 50
Bicycle	€ 20
Total	€ 800

Montly expenses

Accommodation	€ 360 / month
Food	€ 150 / month
Insurance	€ 120 / month
Models and posters	€ 15 / month
Total	€ 645 / month

Accommodation

I lived on campus at Zijing Apartments, where I had my own room with a small bathroom. The rooms are small and very basic, the furniture is a bit worn. Every room has a desk, and the dorms are not so noisy, so studying there is quite comfortable. Every other day the staff mops your room and every two weeks the linens are changed. Every floor has a shared washing machine and a room to hang clothes. There are also other types of rooms. There is an option to share a bathroom with your neighbour for the same price. These buildings also have a small common room and are closer to the faculty and parks. There are also rooms which are shared by two people for half the price. Living on campus is convenient because upon arrival you don't have to stay at a hostel and look for a room. Some students stay at Zijing the first two months, which is the minimum rental period, and after that move to a more lively neighbourhood. From what I have heard, rents outside the campus are higher.

Language

Studying at Tsinghua does not require a language test, although that's what is says on the website. I lived in South China before for six months, so I already knew some Mandarin. On campus most Chinese people speak some English and many foreign students speak some Chinese, so getting around is not that difficult even if you don't know the language. Most people outside the campus gates however do not speak English, which makes communication challenging. Gesturing using your arms and legs might help. Speaking the language makes getting around much easier, but learning Chinese takes time. If you want to learn some basics, I recommend Primslours Chinese, a listening language course which you can follow at your own pace.

Culture

Chinese culture is very different from European culture. Because I had already lived in China before, I knew what to expect. If this is the first time you travel to China, it might take some time to get used to some aspects of life in China. Though I must say I was unable to get used to some, like the poor air quality and the poor hygiene in many places. Prepare yourself to face large crowds. There are more people living in the city of Beijing than in Holland. But even though cities are packed with people, they are incredibly safe. In general the Chinese are more reserved and communicate more indirectly. But most of them are interested in foreigners so often on the street they will talk to you or ask if they can take a picture with you. The best way to understanding Chinese culture is to make Chinese friends. Another way to learn more about the culture is to explore and travel. China has a very long and interesting history and Beijing is a great place to discover its traces. Around the campus are some sites to visit. The old city of Beijing is a bit further away; it takes about an hour with public transport.



Promotional activity

During my stay in Beijing I was invited to give a talk at a middle school. I talked about what it's like to study architecture and what architects do in their work. I showed some examples of my student work and work of the office where I did an internship. After that the class and I talked about how architects use drawings, a subject children can relate to. After my talk, the class was given an assignment to make an architectural drawing following some of my tips.

Free time

Because of the busy program, I had very little free time. When I did, I enjoyed taking walks around campus and going to the cafés. During the summer I often went to the outdoor pool. On campus there are many other sports facilities and student clubs and just outside the campus gates are shops, restaurants and some bars. You can also find more western products here like bread. The supermarket on the corner of the Tout Les Jours sells nice bread. Bars and restaurants in the city are much nicer I think, but it takes more time to get there. When you go to the city it is great to walk around in the Hutongs, and find a park to take a nap. Another personal favourite is 798 Art District, a former industrial area taken over by artists.

Travelling

Around Beijing there are some nice places to travel to. Of course the Great Wall is one of the places to go, there are several sites you can visit and several ways to get there. If you don't take a tour prepare your trip well and it would be helpful if someone in the group talks Chinese. I took the bus and a taxi to Jiankou to walk from there to Mutianyu. Jiankou is not restored, which made finding the way to the wall quite difficult but the scenery was extraordinary. We were lucky enough to come across an American couple who knew the way. The walk takes a few hours and is steep and slippery. If you take this route choose a clear day and start really early. At Mutianyu the path becomes easier



because it's renovated. I also went on a trip to some places around Beijing of which Qufu was my favourite. Confucius lived and died there, so there are many sites to visit. Also there is a very nice and clean hostel on the long road to the forest. After the semester ended I took the high speed train to Suzhou and Shanghai. It takes more time to get there, around five hours, but it is definitely worth the trip.

Other

For architects China is very interesting. The economy is growing so there are many jobs and opportunities there. The working conditions are different from those in Holland. In general, working overtime is expected and unpaid. Many companies have a hierarchal culture, which means that you have follow and not question whatever your superior says. On the other hand, it is more likely you will get your own project more quickly than in a western company. Personally I would like to work in Asia, but I would prefer to do so in a western company. I imagine communication and understanding is easier. I would not like to return to live in Beijing mainly because the climate is harsh and the air quality is very poor. I much prefer the south, especially Hong Kong.

In China, Tsinghua University and Peking University are the most renowned and competitive universities. If your aim is to set foot in China and work there later, Tsinghua is a very good choice. If you want to do more exploring and live in a more comfortable climate perhaps another university in another city is more suitable. Either way, your journey will be filled with new experiences and will make you see the world from another perspective. Studying in Beijing has made me understand Chinese culture in a new way and I have improved my Chinese a lot. Also I have gained a new appreciation for so many things at home, which makes me very excited to enjoy them again back in Holland.

If you still have any questions, feel free to contact me at anandadevos@gmail.com!

