

# One Year in China

Double-Degree Program in Shanghai



## Introduction

My name is Sebastian and I am studying Economics and Engineering at the West Saxon University of Applied Science in Zwickau. In this report I am going to write about my experience during my double-degree program in China. Why I took part, how I got there, what I did over there and what insights and lessons it provided to me.

The double-degree program, I am going to introduce, is open to all students studying at a University which is a member of the DHIK (Deutsches Hochschulkonsortium für Internationale Kooperationen). Currently, about 30 Universities belong to this consortium. The program is provided for multiple courses of study as followed: automotive engineering (Fahrzeugtechnik), Economics and Engineering (Wirtschaftsingenieurwesen), building-/supply engineering (Gebäude-/Versorgungstechnik) and mechatronics (Mechatronik). It is possible to take part in this program in China or Mexico. The year includes one semester of studying at a partner University and one semester completing an internship in that country, during your internship you will write your bachelor thesis.

For me as economics and engineering student, I could credit the semester of studies as my economic profile and credit the internship as well, at the WHZ. The program gives the opportunity to study, work and live abroad. On top, it would also provide a bachelor-degree of the partner university additional to the German degree, not prolonging the standard study time overall. For myself I decided to go to China completing the one-year double degree course at the Tongji University in Shanghai.

China is the second largest, one of the fastest growing, and most thriving economies in the world. This alone is a remarkable possibility to live, work and study there for a student of my course. Providing myself amazing experiences and highlights in my resume. Additionally, I also took this decision because I have been already to China for traveling and was fascinated by the country ever since. Furthermore, Shanghai is one of the major economic powerhouses in China and Asia. Especially known for being the financial and fashion center in Mainland China, as well as growing into a major hub for Research and Development (R&D) in several areas of digital economy such as AI and Big Data. As I have learned major companies such as Porsche, BOSCH, BASF and so on having their Asia/China headquarter in Shanghai.

The first time I went to China was in 2014, during my summer break, when I visited my brother who lived at that time in Shanghai. He also took part at the double-degree program and I stayed with him for one month. During this time, I could experience the metropolitan city Shanghai and got to see the Chinese countryside (rural area) as well. It was an interesting and amazing time. One of my favorite memories, is to experience the victory of Germany in the football world-cup while watching it at a public viewing in Shanghai far past midnight, due to the time difference. The public viewing was full of people from all over the world, Mexican, Brazilian, French, Dutch, Russian, Japanese etc., basically the whole world was there together. But I also could get an academic experience, taking part in a program that promoted the English language in rural areas of China. Participating in this program brought me to the

province Inner Mongolia, in the northern part of China, with other foreign students. I was staying one week, with foreign students that studied in China, in Inner Mongolia, and we did plenty of visits to schools, libraries, public meets and local families. The goal was to teach English to the family and their kids, as well as having a cultural exchange.

While my studies in Zwickau, I already planned to apply for the double-degree in China, I got an additional opportunity to go to China again. During a lecture, a professor of the FH Kiel introduced his summer school project, the so called "Chinese Project Semester" (CPS). This program aimed to give students from partner universities of the DHIK ([www.dhik.org](http://www.dhik.org)), the opportunity to take part in a Project Semester program, to get a better understanding of China and the advantages of studying there for one-year. Even or maybe especially because I already have been to China and was already sure I am going to apply for the double degree program, I applied for the CPS as well and luckily got accepted. During the CPS, a study week in Kiel and one study week in Shanghai was arranged. All the participants met in Kiel, to learn more about China's culture, economy, history, language, and other related topics. This week gave me a much better general understanding of the Chinese culture, history, and economy. The gained knowledge during this preparation week provided all students a much deeper insight in China. Overall, the CPS made me even more excited to spend a full year in this far away country, basically all my doubts were vanished. After the preparation week in Kiel, we got split up in groups and got tasks to complete until we all would meet again in Shanghai. Each group got a topic about different types of innovative business models in China, we should research on. While we stayed in Shanghai, we did several factory tours at big companies and presented our results to various company representatives, such as Volkswagen, Startup Factory, Brose. During this time, we stayed at the campus of the Tongji University, where I would stay as well during my studies in China. Therefore, the CPS was a good "warm-up" for my one-year exchange studies over there. I was extremely glad and thankful to have this additional opportunity to prepare myself and make new liked-minded friends as well.

During the one-year in China, you are going to study at the CDHAW (Chinesisch-Deutsche Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften), a faculty of the Tongji University in Shanghai. The Tongji University was founded in 1907 by a German doctor in China. Today the university has over 50.000 students and is one of the elite Universities in China. The University is based in Shanghai, a city with over 24 million inhabitants and one of the major economic centers of China. A completely new scope of number coming from Germany. Promising a life-changing experience with a lot of new challenges.

## **Preparation**

Having such a big plan, moving to China, comes with a lot of preparation, but before I knew of all that I had to apply for the exchange program to start my journey. I learned about the program by friends and my brother who took part at the program several years ago and they

promoted it during their studies at the WHZ. I knew early I am going to take part and was just waiting for the application process to be available. Therefore, in the beginning of 2019 the application was open for me and provided the first challenges. The application process was unlike everything I had done before, we had to collect a lot of documents and prepare a lot of translations. Because of modifications regarding to the process and changes by Chinese regulations the process was not the easiest although we had contact persons supporting us. After some small problems solved, my fellow students and I got everything we needed, also including a doctor's health examination, to apply. After sending our application to China we had to wait until we get a feedback from the Tongji University, but still had other things to prepare. Applying for scholarships to finance our year abroad, for example. There are multiple resources to get money for studying abroad, like generic scholarships, Bafög for studying abroad and private institutions contributing money to students. I applied for multiple scholarships, including PROMOS, CSC (Chinese Scholarship Council) and a small private support association. I luckily got accepted to all three of the scholarships I applied for.

PROMOS is a scholarship backed by the BMBF (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung) that every student can apply for. This scholarship is for studying abroad, doing an internship abroad or taking part in a summer school. For studying abroad the scholarship can be provided for one semester, six months, with an amount set by the country you will study at. I applied for it at the WHZ international office, to cover my first semester studying in China.

CSC is a Chinese Government Scholarship that provides money to Chinese Universities they can use to promote some of their students, Chinese and foreign. This is a very generous scholarship providing a monthly amount of money (2500RMB around 300€) and other accomplishments as well. I could appreciate it even more during my stay in China, learning what an honor it was to be sponsored by the CSC and how hard it is to get usually if you are not part of the exchange program. Students from the exchange program have a higher chance to win the scholarship. Beside the monthly money, like most scholarships provide, benefits like your Chinese health insurance and covering your dorm room are included.

Private support associations becoming more and more common for scholarships, how I learned during my applications as well. As previously mentioned, I also applied for one of those at the Mentor e.V. in Zwickau and got a monthly support.

Every support you can get is extremely helpful. I am grateful for all the support I got, what is not ordinary and as I learned abroad German students are incredible lucky regarding to all the scholarship opportunity their country provides.

After finishing all the applications, for the double-degree program and scholarships, I got the acceptance by the Tongji University and I received my invitation letter, that allowed me to apply for a student Visa at the Chinese embassy. Also overcoming this obstacle all bureaucracy steps were finally done to go to China, now the only thing left to do was booking the flight to Shanghai!

In the last weeks in Germany we had to cancel our apartment, sell, or shut down our cars and say goodbye to family and friends. Saying goodbye and breaking down our life in Germany was not an easy task. For some it was hard, but we were all excited for our upcoming adventure. My fellow students from Zwickau and I booked the same flight so we could go together to Shanghai. We were meeting up in Berlin, where our flight to Shanghai, with an overlay in Moscow, started. A final goodbye to family members and friends that came to the airport, and we set off to China for one year. It was a long and exhausting trip. We arrived in Shanghai, got our luggage, and headed to the Campus. Because of the sheer size of Shanghai, it took us two hours by metro to get there. In the Metro we all battled against not falling asleep and miss our stop where we had to get off. After starting in Germany in the early morning we arrived the next day in the evening at the campus, due to the time difference. That some of our luggage got missing was something we had to tackle in the upcoming days and was an issue we already counted with. Lucky, we packed our most basic supplies in our carry-on luggage, always be prepared and a step ahead.

## **Study in China**

Our first step in China, after arriving at our Campus, was to register in the dorm and get our rooms where we would stay. In the dorm we were already greeted by other German students that also arrived and had to check in. Thanks to the CSC scholarship I receive, I got my room fee paid. I had to share my room with a fellow student. My male student friend from Zwickau unfortunately did not receive the CSC scholarship, so we had to live in different rooms. He took a small room for one person, he had to pay by himself and I got a room I had to share with a random CSC sponsored student I did not know before. I met another German student from Aachen in the lobby that also had no roommate yet, so after a quick chat we both felt it could be a good match and we agreed to move in the same room. The first China experience for me, moving in a room with a random person I just met! For German students usually not imaginable, to share a room and bath with someone else. However, in China normal, most Chinese students share are room in groups of four up to eight, so we foreign students already had a luxury by just sharing a room by two. Our room was simple but had everything we needed, everyone got his own bed, desk and wardrobe and a shared bathroom with a shower, toilet, and sink was inside the room. After the first night no one had truly realized where we are and what we were about to do. So, in the morning after a quick chat with the people working in the dorm, to help us find out where our luggage went missing, we set of to explore the campus. I have been to this campus already during my week in Shanghai while taking part in the CPS, but it was the first day for most of the German student to see the campus in daylight. The campus is not comparable to something you know in Germany. I think Zwickau already has a beautiful campus, but the sheer size of our new campus was stunning. We lived at the Jiading campus, one of multiple of the Tongji University. Our campus alone had a shopping street, multiple restaurants, hair cutters, post office, banks, cinema, a swimming

hall, basketball courts, footballs field, plenty of teaching facilities and more. Took us some time to get to know the Campus. Where to find what and which restaurants and cafeterias we like. Always important to know where to eat and spend money, in China called Yuan, RMB or equivalent to bucks the locals are calling their current kuai.

All the foreign students already arrived a week prior the beginning of the semester, to finish some necessities we still had to complete in advance. We registered at the university and got our student cards. Registered at a police station where we lived, to get our student visa fully approved and other appointments, we had to take part in. Like another visit at a doctor for a checkup. All these formal steps and figuring out where to go, like paying our health insurance took some time, because some bureaus just opened after the semester started. During this time, we also got all our missing luggage!

During this transition time of arriving in a new country, doing multiple formal steps, and starting with lectures we got to know a lot of new things about other countries and ourselves. We started adapting our life to China. For example, one of the greatest wins was to figure out how to pay the shared bike service, that also was available on our campus and all over Shanghai, with our smartphones. Smartphones got very important to us, because in China you can do everything with it. Paying with cash is weird for Chinese people, and we had to set up our Chinese bank accounts to connect to our WeChat.

*WeChat is like WhatsApp and every other app you daily use. In WeChat, you can chat, and call like in WhatsApp, share your moments and most important pay with. You use it to pay in restaurants, grocery stores, your local fruit shop and even street stands selling food.*



*This is the Jiading Campus of the Tongji University where I studied. (13 – dorms for foreign students | 16 – library | 4 – CDHAW building | 14 – start of the shopping street | 18 – sport facilities)*

Getting used to the new culture, food, and way of life was a big adapting process.

With the start of lectures, we also noticed they are different to what we were used to from Germany. Compulsory attendance, mid-term exams, plenty of presentations and lectures past 8 p.m. got normal for us, even lectures on Saturday. A typical study day for us were to wake up, grab a shared bike to get to the classroom, maybe get a breakfast on the way there. German type of breakfast is not common, a typical Chinese breakfast is warm and most of us had to get used to it and find something we would like as breakfast. The go to for the most German students were hard-boiled eggs, thin breads filled with meat or vegetables, fried pastry, or Baozi. Baozi (*bāozi*/包子) is a dough bun filled with various ingredients, depending on the kind. Lectures are in block, like in Germany, taking one and a half hour with a five-minute break in between. The big breaks between lectures are quite big so the student can eat. Doing this in one of the cafeterias or restaurants on the campus was typical for most of us. But also taking warmed up food somewhere to eat or order something was something we adapted to quickly. We only had one kitchen at each floor in the dorm, so cooking was a rare occasion, also due to the cheap prices going out to eat or order it by phone. Small things like getting a fresh juice, ordering anything you can think of like McDonald's, we had one on our campus, was frequent. After the lectures ended everyone headed for their free time activities. May it be going out to eat, do sports a facility on the campus or just hanging out with others. You might have already noticed eating is an important (free-) time activity in China. One of the things you must get used to, is not to be able to drink water from the tap. For drinking water you either buy it at a shop every time you need something to drink or find a *shui-guy* (Wasserjunge), who brings a big canister of drinking water to your room if you call him. Buying something to drink or snack was a daily occasion, with stores open every day 24 hours makes it very convenient. Our behaviors changed a lot. Going out to eat for dinner in groups up to ten people, using our smartphone for everything and preparing university work almost every day during peak times got common. If you go abroad you need a transition time, but not only to adapt to the new country but also later back to Germany of course. Having fast internet with up to 100 GB a month for your smartphone, for only 12€ a year, yes a year, as student seemed normal to use after a certain time in such a different country like China but was hard adapting back to in Germany.

As mentioned, the lectures were playing a bigger role in the daily life than it may be in Germany, not only due to the compulsory attendance. Having lectures with midterms, attendance and contributing to the class counting to the finals were new. In the beginning maybe a bit scary coming from independent classes we were used to from Germany. After getting used to it and adapting, it made us realize and follow easily through what we had to do and when, so it got much more relaxing compared to the beginning.

But of course, the free time should not come to short. Like using the sport facilities at the campus or going by metro to the city center to explore the downtown of Shanghai. Having a hangout with friends on Fridays at the campus golf ranch shooting some balls at a lake and meanwhile planning the weekend was a normal thing to do. Weekends with no lecture were mostly used to travel around in China or other countries in Asia, or of course to party. Shanghai

is also a party city with things like free entry and free drinks for foreigners, what the students thankfully embraced. Going out in a metropolis like Shanghai guaranteed to meet new people from all over the world living their life on their own ways, leading to unforgettable experiences and conversations. Great friendships were built, not only between the German students at our campus. China outside of Shanghai has also a lot to offer. We traveled through China and saw various places during our exchange year. Free weeks like Golden Week, a national holiday everyone has vacation, were used to explore the rest of Asia. Smaller friend groups of students went to Thailand, Mongolia, Vietnam or even the United States of America and others visiting different cities of China like Beijing (Peking), Suzhou (a famous Watertown near Shanghai). All those stories of their trips were used to draw inspiration for our own upcoming travels.

During our weeks of long classes with preparing many presentations, sport activities, eating out and going out to world-class clubs and bars were our new lifestyle of choice, big city life. Having the freedom to travel now and then was amazing, and mostly possible thanks to the provided scholarships. But this time came to an end, leading to our finals and looking for our internship to do during our second semester. Thanks to Shanghai being world-class city, we could even go to Christmas markets during the Christmastime, although we also had our finals during that time. Because Christmas is not common in China, we had finals from mid of December until the beginning of January, including one final at the 24<sup>th</sup> of December or one at the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January. Done with our exams most of us already had their internships secured. This was also a great experience, an internship in a foreign country. Visiting and contacting big companies everyone knows and smaller companies you never heard of as a western. Formal steps for an internship were hard again, getting a permit for it with the allowance of the university. Parting away from all the friends you made and the university campus to head to a working life would be hard. In the middle of January most of us were done with the finals, planned, and accepted the internships we all had finally our last holiday together, before spreading all over China. From January to February in China is "New Year" holiday, the biggest national holiday during the year. Most of us used this holiday to travel and prepare their internships, because most of us had to move. Some went back to Germany to meet family and friends; others traveled China or the rest of Asia and the world.

I decided with two friends of mine, to use the free month we got, before our internship would start, to travel all over Vietnam. We planned to travel Vietnam from north to south and see what date it is after we arrived in the very south and then plan what to do next. This was amazing freedom. Visiting other Asian cities, boat cruises through tropical islands or driving motorcycle through different landscapes and chilling at beautiful beaches was a trip most people only could dream of. Noticing we would have time left after completing what we had planned in Vietnam, we set to expand our plans to other countries. During this time, we did not know our holidays would extend, and we would have to stay out of China. Done with our plans in Vietnam we traveled around south-east Asia. Somewhere in Indonesia we got the first bad news regarding COVID-19. Our University got closed and China was locked down. Not knowing what the future would bring we extended our travels even further. As it got worse and worse, we had to think of what to do. Plenty of our fellow students already went back to

Germany and canceled their internship plans. We on the other hand were optimistic back then and had no need to get back to Germany, so we made the best out of it by travelling around Asia. After no improvements of the situation, we had to make our decision. After almost two months travelling south-east Asia, we had to cancel our internships and go back to Germany. Internships could not be started, and our University in Shanghai were closed anyway. We made our decision and went back to Germany with an overlay in China to get our luggage out of the dorm. Having to go from an island in Thailand to Bangkok, to Shanghai to receive our belongings and then fly back to Germany was an incredibly long journey and could be a story by itself. But sadly, this makes the end of my adventure in China for now. Having only finished half of it and separated from all my new made friends without having a chance to say goodbye, felt depressing.

Now my focus had to change, back to Germany. Adapting back to culture and how to make my unexpected start here. In need of finding something to do for this semester back in Germany I considered my opportunities. COVID-19 already hit Germany as well, so an internship to get here was hard as well. So, my decision was to go back to Zwickau to study and make the most out of it regarding my left courses. With the WHZ shut down as well I also had no lectures to go to, so I passed my time working to earn some money and prepare for the exams that should take place during summer. Now the plan is to study the winter semester in Zwickau as well and then go back to China in 2021 to finally complete my internship in a company in China and write my bachelor thesis and maybe prolonging my stay to write my diplom-thesis as well to finish my studies in the end of 2021 or beginning of 2022.



*Golfing on Campus | Traveling (Suzhou) | Dinner | German students*

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion it was an amazing experience. I think going abroad during studies is a great idea in general. Going abroad makes you to experience so many new things and therefore learn incredible new skills. You will meet new people, learn how to manage unusual circumstances, and new challenges presents you new perspectives.

For me personal it was the greatest semester so far during my studies. Going abroad to China confronted me with a completely new culture and surrounding that I had to adapt to. Taking the trip to China by itself was an interesting process, that made all of us more independent and helped us at solving and overcoming problems we never thought of. Moving to China is a big step with a lot of obstacles. But all this new challenge which were new to us and the things

we overcame together made us grow stronger and smarter. Making new friends and having to master new tasks like how to find good places to eat and order food, find the places to go for clubbing and studying and how to get there really forged us. Because we all went through those processes together and lived with each other for six months we built great new friendships that hopefully hold for a lifetime.

Learning new soft skills became a new habit, trying to order food in Chinese, learn how those Chinese apps work and demonstrating our newly learned knowledge in English to our classmates. Learning by doing was our approach. Just trying to order a taxi on our smartphone and get to the place we wanted to seemed overwhelming in the beginning but was usual at the end of our stay.

During our time we all grew our own identities, we formed them and got a new sense of it. By being on our own we grew to more adult people knowing our limits better and understanding what we were capable of to achieve. Learning and seeing more of the world and other countries is a real eyeopener, widening your horizon for ever. Travelling China and Asia makes you realize that there is plenty of new and interesting stuff and people out there to be explored and learn about. So many ways to live on this earth, so different from how we are used to here in Germany. Accepting other lifestyles and ways to solve problems. Traveling, studying, living, and going out with a great diversity of people is making you to respect and acknowledge differences and diversities more. This also really helps to learn more than just the subjects in University. In the beginning many of us thought we were missing out on our life in Germany, but we just opened a new chapter. With plenty of new things and great experiences, so no one kept that feeling for long. To meet people our age but going different ways in their life shows how many opportunities we have in our life. All this experience gave me a big boost of confidence, overcoming such big obstacles makes you really grow as a person, cannot stress that enough. We will never be the same as before, and our new friendships welded us together strongly. We all let go of our life in Germany to open our new chapter, and we mastered it! It was a bit of a risk but with a great outcome.

But still there were of course some downsides, but not major enough to dull our experience. The start in China of course was hard, in a foreign country with only strangers. But the challenges started back in Germany. For other students going the same way as I did, I would wish them a better start and preparation and of course not such a sudden ending. Nobody can be blamed for my end, but the preparation could be smoother. Having someone that already went through all the steps really helps and is really a necessity to start such a big journey, I think. For upcoming students, I wish they have this kind of person to talk to and hear about different experiences. This would also spark inspiration on what to do and maybe prepare. For most of my friends the first step of applying and quitting their life in Germany was the hardest part, because once you are abroad you cannot really change it. Once abroad you try to make the best out of it, and it will be a great time. But to get there is not so easy and most important is you do the first step! All I can say, just go for it!

Therefore, I want to help upcoming students who want to take part in this exchange program in the future. Promoting and supporting it at my university to get as many students to undertake the first step forward. Going through the application process with them for the program and scholarships as well. This would make it much easier for them. Also talking about my experiences and what I would do differently will hopefully help them to make the first step and inspire them.

I am looking forward to helping those upcoming students and to go back to China myself!