

Here's my Study Abroad Story

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Major: Economics

Program: The Middlebury Program in Beijing is hosted at Capital Normal University (CNU) in the Haidian District (west side) of Beijing. Because the program was not on CMC's approved list, I went through a simple petition process to participate in it. There were several other universities in the vicinity of my host institution including Beijing Foreign Languages Studies University. When I attended, the program was small, consisting of just 10 students and 5 or 6 regular teachers and directors. All the students in our program were assigned to a dorm with a Chinese roommate who attended CNU. Although we did not take classes with local students, all of our classes were taught in Mandarin and a strict language pledge ensured that we practiced speaking outside of class. In addition to attending group classes, students on the program were each taught a one-on-one class on a topic of our choice (I chose Taiwanese-Chinese relations) by a graduate student from Minzu University.

The Middlebury program offered a number of cultural experiences. Among other things, we were taught dumpling making, mahjong, and traditional tea-brewing. Prior to our trip to see Peking Opera, we even had an opera make-up artist paint our faces. The program included a weekend trip to Luoyang, the ancient capital of China for over 2700 years. A week-long fall break also allowed me to travel via high-speed rail to Suzhou, widely known as the "Venice of the East" for its winding canals and unique architecture.

Typical Day: I would typically wake up for class at 8:30 am. I attended two classes which took up around 4 hours of my typical weekday, and homework tended to consume another 5 hours a day. Although the workload was heavy during the week, weekends typically consisted of sponsored trips to ancient sites around the city including the Summer Palace, Forbidden City, Temple of Heaven, and Great Wall.



In addition, Wednesdays typically consisted of a field trip for a class called "Beijing in Transformation" during which we would visit a portion of Beijing that reflected its rapid change and development. Destinations for these field trips included 798 Art District and the Zhongguancun Tech District.

Lunch typically consisted of either going to a local restaurant or a CNU dining hall with Chinese roommates or teachers. Whenever I got tired of options near CNU, neighborhoods with ample street food and ethnic minority restaurants were just a bus ride away. When Friday or Saturday night rolled around, going to a karaoke bar with a mix of CNU students and students from neighboring universities was a common pastime. One of my friends even found students at Beijing and Tsinghua Universities with whom to play racquetball.

Highlights: The highlights of my experience in China are hard to narrow down. To this day, one of my most poignant memories is the massive traditional *shuixi* (soup banquet) that we enjoyed in Luoyang, where among other things I tried turtle soup and rabbit meat for the first time. However, one of the biggest highlights had to be the point

at which Beijing locals began assuming based off my Mandarin speaking that I was from Southern China rather than the US. Even after re-entry, one of the most gratifying experiences I had was speaking with my relatives in Mandarin and receiving compliments on my improved pronunciation and vocabulary. I also may have run into famous artist and political dissident Ai Wei Wei.

Challenges: Because there is a huge smoking culture in China, there were really no strict prohibitions on smoking in the international dorm I stayed in. I therefore had to deal with poor air quality both indoors and outdoors (due to smog) which made dealing with a small cold or allergies much more of an uphill climb. Homesickness was also definitely a challenge for me while I was abroad. About a month in, I began missing friends and relatives and regretting the fact that I was missing events on campus. However, as soon as I started focusing on my current experience, I enjoyed my program much more.

Advice: Speak your foreign language! Don't be afraid to look foolish because you learn from your mistakes! Last but not least, don't hesitate to try new foods and flavors, no matter how odd they seem to you at first. After all, you don't go to China to eat their McDonald's.

