

# **Report Tongji Summer School 2024**

## **Introduction:**

Since October 2023, I have been studying Chinese at the University of Cologne, with an eventual goal of spending a year abroad in China. When the opportunity arose to attend a summer program at Tongji University in Shanghai, I was immediately drawn to it. This experience would allow me to familiarize myself with Chinese daily life and academic culture, which would be invaluable in preparing me for a more extended stay.

## **Application and Preparation:**

Applying and preparing for the Summer School was fairly easy, thanks to the organizers, who were very helpful with any questions or problems we faced. Going to China—what otherwise would have been a daunting task—was made much more comfortable with meetings held before the Summer School began and the tips and advice given to us. By the time we were ready to go, my friends and I felt very prepared, as if any pre-trip anxieties had been cleared.

## **Arrival in Shanghai:**

Despite our careful preparation, the first moments in Shanghai presented unexpected challenges. Firstly, we had no idea how to get from the airport to the hotel, and secondly, we had no internet access. Not having internet in China feels equivalent to a death sentence due to nearly all payments being transacted via AliPay or WeChat Pay, both requiring internet to work. Thus, we found ourselves stranded at the airport with no way to pay for any necessities. After a mix of awkward interactions with locals and using cash we had exchanged in Germany, we eventually arrived at the hotel. However, for the first few days, we had to rely on friends to pay for us because the local SIM-card shop did not open until three days after our arrival. When it finally did open, our organizers were very helpful in guiding us through buying SIM-cards. Normally, buying a SIM-card would have been a troublesome task, but with the organizers' help, it was incredibly simple.

Looking back, not arranging internet access in advance was a significant oversight. I would strongly advise future participants to plan for this by purchasing a prepaid SIM-card before departure or finding alternatives to ensure access to essential services upon arrival. This would help avoid the difficulties we encountered and make the first few days more comfortable.

## **Daily Life in Shanghai:**

The Summer School began the morning after we arrived. After a very friendly introduction, we were separated into two language courses: one for beginners and one for students with prior knowledge of the language. Given my prior studies in Cologne, I was placed in the latter.

The language course far exceeded my expectations and was a great help in furthering my studies. Classes were held daily from 9:00 AM to noon, and the sessions were conducted almost entirely in Chinese, providing an immersive experience that significantly improved my listening and comprehension. The method, while straightforward, was highly effective. The teacher engaged us in continuous conversation, which encouraged us to respond in Chinese and strengthened both our speaking and listening abilities. This immersive approach was different from my previous studies and allowed me to feel more comfortable using the language in everyday contexts.

Our teacher was not only knowledgeable but also enthusiastic and incredibly friendly, making each class enjoyable. Her enthusiasm for teaching and encouragement fostered a positive and engaging learning environment. I found myself looking forward to each session, as it was both challenging and rewarding.

The schedule did pose some challenges. While having classes in the morning allowed us to dedicate the afternoons to exploring Shanghai, the combination of midday heat and the extended commute to central Shanghai limited the time we had to visit major attractions. In my experience, after classes, you would need at least an hour to prepare to head out into the city again. With most attractions closing around 4:00 or 5:00 PM, we were often left with only a few hours to sightsee after accounting for travel and rest time. Adjusting the class times to start an hour earlier could improve this experience, as it would allow participants to make the most of their afternoons. I felt this schedule limited one's ability to get to know the city.

Personally, I would have gladly moved classes to begin and end one hour earlier, yet I know that many of my fellow students would be outraged at this idea. In the end, I did still find time to do everything I wanted to in the city.

## **Group Excursions:**

Aside from language classes, the program included a variety of cultural activities and excursions designed to immerse us in Chinese traditions and local customs. My feelings on these are mixed.

My favorite activity was a lesson in calligraphy, in which a local calligraphy artist taught us how to paint a panda. It was a very pleasant experience and gave insights into a topic I previously knew nothing about.

On some days, however, the activities were less engaging. For example, a visit to the “World Skills Museum” left many of us puzzled, as I still struggle to understand its purpose or relevance. Similarly, a trip to the “German Centre” went beyond being uninteresting and made me feel actively uncomfortable and out of place. While it’s understandable that the organizers wanted to provide a variety of experiences, a closer alignment of these activities with our studies or interests might have made them more enjoyable.

On the weekends, the entire Summer School went on trips to nearby cities. My feelings on these trips are similar to my feelings regarding the centrally planned activities. On the first weekend, we visited the city of Hangzhou. I thought seeing this famously beautiful city was great, and I really enjoyed my time there, even despite the intense local heat. Our visit to a market there and our visit to the old town of Wuzhen the following day were some of my favorite memories of my entire time in China.

On the complete opposite end, however, was our visit to Yancheng the following week, which bordered on the bizarre. Looking at the itinerary for Yancheng, I already felt stressed with activities being scheduled incredibly tightly, as we were expected to visit a new location nearly every half hour. To make us feel even more stressed, the night before our city visit, we were informed that we would be meeting city officials there, which made me very uncomfortable. While our time in Yancheng had nice parts—most notably, a visit to a beautiful park in the evening—I overall have a very weird feeling when looking back on the entire experience.

### **Community and Connections:**

A significant highlight of the Summer School was the sense of community it fostered. We were accompanied daily by volunteering students from Tongji University, who not only assisted us with language barriers but also shared insights into Chinese student life. Getting to know these students added a personal dimension to the experience, allowing us to form friendships that I hope will last beyond the program.

Likewise, the bond with fellow German students attending the program was invaluable. Together, we navigated the highs and lows of living and studying in a new environment, which helped us connect on a deeper level. Spending time together, exploring the city, dining out, and helping one another made the entire experience significantly more enjoyable.

## **Conclusion:**

Overall, I greatly enjoyed my time at the Summer School at Tongji University. The program exceeded my expectations by not only advancing my language skills but also preparing me for the realities of living in China.

The language classes provided a tremendous boost to my confidence and fluency, making me feel more equipped for everyday interactions and further studies back in Germany. The variety of excursions offered insightful impressions of both the modern and historical sides of China. While some activities were more engaging than others, each experience allowed me to learn more about the different aspects of Shanghai. Even with the challenges of adapting to new schedules and customs, I felt that each day I was able to learn something new about the country and its culture.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the Summer School was the people I got to know along the way. The friendships I developed with both local volunteers and fellow students made the experience even more meaningful.

In conclusion, Tongji University's Summer School was both an excellent stepping stone toward my goal of a year abroad in China and a great experience in itself. I feel more prepared and excited than ever to deepen my connection with China. I would highly recommend this program to any student interested in China.