

The Beijing Exchange Survival Handbook

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Getting there

First of all, China does not recognize Taiwanese passports, so you will need to have a Taiwan Region Travel Pass to enter the mainland. The cost is approximately 1,550 NT for the application of a new Travel Pass and if you already have a Travel Pass but not a valid visa, it costs approximately 500 NT for a one time visa which is valid for 3 months.¹ However, do remember that visas are only valid for 3 months and upon expiration, you will need to apply for an extension at the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau located not far from YongHe Temple Station. Your new visa will be valid for one year, which is convenient for future travel plans.



Plane tickets to Beijing via Hong Kong for a half year period costs approximately 14,000 NT dollars, slightly more than a 3 months travel ticket of 10,000 NT. The flight time is around 6 hours including 1 hour waiting at Hong Kong Airport. If you have never been to Hong Kong, you can take this chance to travel or at least stay over at Hong Kong Airport, which is full of entertainment.

Normally, the exchange office at Tsinghua University arranges a group pick-up at the Beijing Capital International Airport. However, since I arrived one day early and relatively late at night, I chose to take a taxi to school. Taxis are available from official taxi queues and they do follow the meter so you do not have to worry about getting ripped off. The price is approximately 90 RMB from the airport to the Northeast gate of Tsinghua University, closest to the dormitories. Go directly to the dormitory office for check in and congratulations, you have settled yourself down. Do not consider riding the subway to WuDaoKou Station and walk to the dormitories. I am an avid walker and I must say that the road conditions are not favorable at all for a person with luggage. Take the taxi. Taxi drivers in Beijing are rather honest.



Becoming familiar with Tsinghua

I am sure you already know that Tsinghua (THU) is ranked as the first or second best university in mainland China and is well known for its excellence in the engineering departments. The campus was also listed by Forbes magazine in 2012 as one of the 14 world's most beautiful college campuses. Tsinghua University is huge and do not doubt that. It takes 30 minutes to walk from the dormitories to the front gate, which is the Southeast gate. I was reluctant to ride a bicycle at first

¹ Price as quoted by Lion Travel



but succumbed after one week. There are several bicycle stands inside Tsinghua University and a bike is approximately 150 RMB. Yes, this seems rather cheap, but I would suggest purchasing an old bike from those that you meet around you instead of buying a new one, because they are easily stolen even on campus. My advisor at the university was kind enough to lend me a bike, and during the May 1st holidays, the saddle was stolen. I have also heard stories from friends who had their new bike stolen, even with locks, within one week. Therefore, I strongly suggest buying used bikes instead of new ones. However, if you do insist on ridding a new bike, please roughen it up a little after your purchase.

The campus of Tsinghua University is humongous, as I noted previously. The dormitory area is concentrated at the North side of the campus. (This is also why I suggest taking the taxi to the Northeast gate) There is a supermarket located at B1 of the C-building within the dormitory area. C-building is also where your check-in upon arrival. This supermarket is quite large, with various kinds of snacks, daily supplies, and stationaries. The scenic area is located on the western side of campus and is a great place for relaxation when you need one.

The learning experience

The Department of Chemical Engineering at Tsinghua University is ranked first in the Greater China region. There is a Polymer Research Institute within the department that is dedicated to polymer science. During the application process, all visiting scholars were required to select an advisor. Select carefully and if necessary, exchange e-mails with professors whose area of research interests you. My advisor, Professor Yanbin Huang, is an expert in the field of polymer science and drug delivery and this is closely related to my area of research at NTHU. It should be noted that the visiting scholar program is not yet mature and the



department, including department office and advisor, were not

well-informed concerning the requirements for this program. However, everyone was extremely helpful during the entire process.

As a visiting scholar, much of my time was spent in the laboratory of my advisor. Contact your advisor as soon as possible once you arrive and arrange for a meeting time to discuss course



selection. My advisor and I decided to carry out small projects dealing with polymer synthesis, as practice and for gathering data for the laboratory.

Becoming part of a laboratory is also a great opportunity to befriend local students. The department office and laboratory are located in separate buildings but are not far away. The laboratory building, Ying-Shi Building, is a newly constructed unit of 12 floors. The equipment and



environment are both excellent and it was an enjoyable laboratory experience. Students in my laboratory normally follow a strict work schedule, arriving before 9:30 and leaving after 17:00. However, students come and go at will during the day and the atmosphere was relaxed. Professor Huang was extremely kind in mentioning that I should take this rare opportunity to experience China and not only focus on research.

I was enrolled in two courses in the department: Advanced Functional Polymers and Advanced Polymer Seminar. Most professors do welcome listeners to their course; however, the school system does not give the location of the courses in order to prevent overflow of students. You can go to the department office and ask for a complete list of courses given and it will show the location which is normally in the department building. My enrolled courses and another which I listened to, all did not have an examination at the end of the term. From what I understand, majority of graduate level courses in the department require only a thesis to be turned in at the end of the course. Sometimes, an oral presentation of the thesis is required. However, this also means that your grade is solely dependent on that thesis, so start early and do not procrastinate. You will have more fun that way at the end of the term. I suggest letting the professor teaching the course know that you are an exchange student. It is a



good opportunity to get to know the professor since they are all rather hospitable. Do not be too stressed out about the courses and they are not more difficult compared to the ones at NTHU. If you do spend some time on the thesis, you will get decent marks.

What is great about Tsinghua University and Peking University is the availability of lectures and speeches you can attend. Being the top schools in the nation, both universities

are capable of inviting some very prestigious speakers. If you have a weibo account, “bjzuoxi” will give you a full list of lectures available on both campuses each day. I also suggest registering for an account on Douban if you are the event-going type. Select 豆瓣同城-北京 and you will get a whole list of musical, theatrical, and artistic events around town. Arrive early for these events because they tend to be extremely popular. From what I experienced, talks concerning Taiwan are popular among students. Listening to what others have to say about us allows introspection.

Living in Beijing

We, graduate exchange students, were assigned what they called the “old building” for living. I was assigned to the 6th floor of the 31st building, which is one of the older dormitories of at THU. The building consists of a total of 7 floors and is without elevator. There is heating in the room, but not air conditioning. Compared to the Xue Dormitory at NTHU, the room is quite large. However, the room does not have a shower. A simple washroom is available in each room, with a sink and toilet. The shower unit is located approximately 7-minute walk away. I must admit that I have never been to the shower unit because it consists of just an open space with no dividers. This is also the reason why I chose to stay in a room outside of school, despite the extremely expensive rent. If you accept taking showers with



strangers, staying at the dormitories would not be a problem. However, if you cannot accept such a condition, be prepared to pay a large amount for a room outside of the campus. Thanks to a local friend, I was able to find a room close to the west gate of Peking University for a price of 3500 RMB a month. Yes, you heard that correctly, it was an unit consisting of a small balcony, room with television and internet, sanitary unit, and a small kitchen. The room was large enough for two people and thus the rent was split between me and my Chinese roommate. Utilities including

electric and water was approximately 200 RMB for the duration of my stay. The room was without air conditioning as well.

I felt safe living in Beijing and people who have stayed for a long period of time assured me that Beijing is very safe due to its status as the nation capital. So, you do not have to be overly fearful but just maintain a cautious mind so you will not have any regrets.



Internet usage in China

As you know, internet usage is censored heavily in China and thus is difficult to conduct research the way that we are accustomed to. One method of conducting research is to use the VPN available from our own NTHU. Students from China are required to visit websites such as www.cnki.net (中國知網) to view published papers. The usage of VPN allows complete access of the world wide web, including facebook, which is censored in China. Wireless internet is available on the campus its coverage is surprisingly complete. Wireless internet is completely free once you have obtained an internet account from the internet office located in the Main Building. Because I chose to live outside of campus, I am unfamiliar with dormitory internet usage costs.

Weather

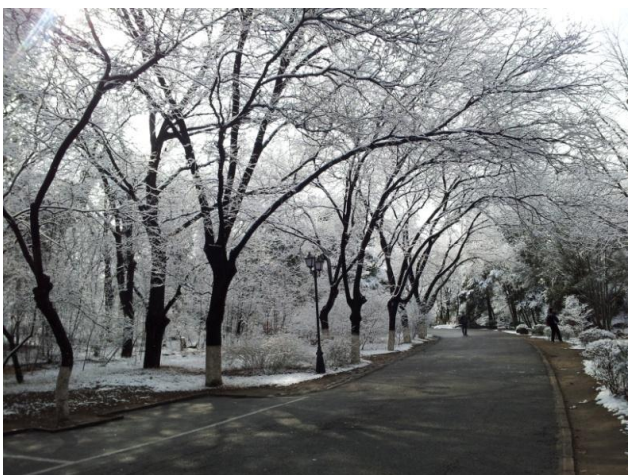
During my stay in Beijing, it only snowed for one day mid-March. I arrived mid-February, which is already considered the end of snow season. It is extremely dry in Beijing and all kinds of lotions should be prepared. I am a person who normally does not put on lotion, but a trip to Beijing made me realize the importance of a good moisturizer.

The wind in Beijing during the winter is almost unbearable. Besides the normal winter gears, please bring something that protects you from the wind.

The atmospheric temperature is usually around 0°C in February which does not seem threatening, but with the wind, it is a different story. Hand moisturizers need to be applied almost every hour to prevent your joints from turning red, and ultimately purple, from the chilling wind. Trust me on this,



I was skeptical about this at first also, but soon learned my lesson.



The weather normally begins to warm up around April and the Spring does not wait before Summer kicks in. Spring lasts for only 2-3 weeks with seeds of willows blowing in the wild throughout the city. If you have allergy concerns, do bring some medicine with you. I swear it is like snowing willow seeds, which looks like cotton, during April.

Summer begins in May, with the temperature rising speedily. My room has no air conditioning and it was bearable during my entire stay there until early July. The temperature difference between day and night is quite large, which helped with making living bearable. It also rarely rains in Beijing, due to the dry climate. During the summer, afternoon showers are common.

Transportation

The subway system in Beijing spans the entire metropolitan area. It is very easy to get around Beijing by subway and bus. If you have a smart phone, I suggest downloading either So gou Map or Baidu Map, both of which gives you very detailed travel routes between any two locations entered including which subway and bus to take.



Traveling by subway will cost you 2 RMB for a one time ticket no matter where you go. Bus tickets cost either 1 RMB or slightly more if you plan to go further. Some buses are 1 RMB flat rate



and these do not have a ticketing lady, so you only need to drop your change into the box at the front door. Otherwise, you will have to purchase a ticket from the ticketing lady on the bus. Just tell them where you are headed and they will tell you the price. I suggest buying a 一卡通 for the duration of your stay in Beijing. It is a top-up card that can be used for subway and bus. Using the card gives you discounted travel rates. (1.6 RMB for subway and 0.4 RMB

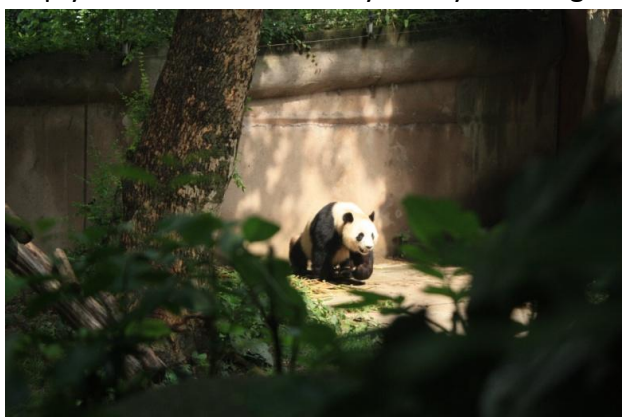
for bus) Peak hour traffic is horrific in Beijing so try not to take the bus or subway at that time. This applies especially to buses. You will not be able to get on and it will take 1 hour to go 2 miles.

Taxi is another method of travel in Beijing. From what I have heard, only Beijing locals are able to obtain a taxi license in Beijing, thus limiting the number of taxis in the city as well as maintaining the standard. 9 out of 10 drivers I have met were polite and kind. The starting rate is 10 RMB flat within a distance. However, once the meter passes 11 RMB, you will need to pay an extra 2 RMB for fuel taxes. Subway and buses in Beijing end service at approximately 11PM, leaving you with no choice but to take the taxi back to school. Taxis are very difficult to hail at nighttime. Very difficult means that do not be surprised if you spend 1 hour trying to get a cab home at 1AM. Even if a cab is available, they often have a direction that they insist on going. So, be patient. There is cab calling service in Beijing, but it is not very dependable. Something worthy of mention is that cabs can enter the dormitory area from the Northeast gate of THU, which saves a lot of walking time.

Traveling in China

China is a country rich in history and culture thus it would be a pity if you do not take this chance to travel around. However, because I was a visiting scholar and not just an exchange student, I was unable to travel as extensively as undergraduates. Nevertheless, I still visited cities including Xi'an, Shanghai, Nanjing, Tienjing, and Chendu. The most convenient and affordable way of travel is by night train. A night train ticket to Xi'an

costs approximately 270 RMB for a hard bunk bed, which saves you accommodation for the night as well. Typical plane ticket costs 700 RMB at least. Train tickets, however, are extremely hard to book due to high demands. Call the Beijing Rail Booking office at 95105105 to book beforehand and pick up your ticket the next day at any ticketing offices. (There is one right outside of the Southeast gate



of school) Tickets go on sale approximately 2 weeks prior to the travel date. However, the policy often changes so to be safe, call the Beijing Rail Booking office several weeks earlier and learn the date that you can purchase your ticket. If you want, you can also go directly to the booking office but I prefer dealing with the machine first, because you never know what type of clerk you will meet and sometimes it will not be a pleasurable experience.

All train tickets in China need to be purchased with a valid ID. In our case, you will need your Taiwan Region Travel Pass both when purchasing and boarding the train.

A travel website I suggest using is www.qunar.com. Here, you can check both train information and flight information. After comparison, I found that the prices for plane tickets are the lowest among travel websites. You can purchase directly through your bank account if you have already setup the internet bank option.² <http://www.12306.cn/> is an official website that supposedly allows you to book train tickets online. I found it very difficult to use and require registration.



² I suggest setting up internet banking option after you open your Bank of China account. You will be able to buy items online easily and safely.

Almost all scenic spots in China cost money, unfortunately. If you are an undergraduate then you are in luck. You can use your student ID card to get a 50% discount. However, this discount often does not apply to graduate students. Try your luck at all places, because sometimes they still do recognize your student status. I was able to get 50% discount at two or three spots. It makes a huge difference.

Eating and having fun

In order to conveniently eat and shop on campus, you can top up your student ID card at several locations including the C-building. Once topped up, you will only need to swipe your card during purchase. Eating on campus is very cheap. For reference, a pork bun costs 1 RMB and a bowl of noodle costs 4-5 RMB. Rice plates cost no more than 7 RMB. If you do decide to venture off campus for food, the price will be higher, but still slightly cheaper than Taiwan.

Foods in Beijing are generally more salty and spicy than what we are accustomed to. If you like heavy tasting food, this is heaven. However, if you are a light eater, prepare yourself lots and lots of water. On the side note, tea and drink shops are uncommon in Beijing, thus it is wise to always keep a bottle of water in your pack. Unsweetened tea is also uncommon in China and you rarely see them in shops.



Besides eating on campus, I am sure sometimes you would want to venture out into town. I did not have any serious problems with food poisoning while I was there. I am sure most of us are able to distinguish a clean restaurant and an unsanitary one. On the side note, in China, beer is much cheaper than water and other drinks. Enjoy!

There is a large supermarket called Lotus approximately 5 minute walk away from the Southeast gate of school. This is a local version of Carrefour and the prices are friendlier than the



school market. An additional 5 minute walk away is the closest shopping district WuDaoKou. This is also where the subway station is located. You will find a whole lot of places to eat around this area, even several Taiwanese shops, such as 鲜芋仙. Because of the number of foreign students on both



the Tsinghua and Peking University campuses, WuDaoKou has an excellent selection of great tasting foreign delicacies, including pizza, Korean bbq, and Pasta. There is a shopping center at WuDaoKou but contains mostly unknown brands and a boutique supermarket similar to our Jason's at the B1 level. If you are a clubbing type, WuDaoKou has several night clubs such as Propaganda and Sensation, both of which are packed on weekends full of students.

Another area of interest close to the campus is ZhongGuanCun, which is south of Peking University. This is where you can buy all your electronic supplies. ZhongGuanCun also has several shopping centers, definitely better selection than WuDaoKou, with familiar shops such as Zara and H&M. ZhongGuanCun is also one subway line 4 which can take you to XiDan, a place that is equivalent to Taipei's XiMenDing. ZhongGuanCun also has several movie theaters. Do not hesitate to use your student ID to purchase movie tickets. You will get a 50% discount.



Beijing is a developing city with the oldest districts located within the parameters of subway line 2 and taking this line will take you to scenic spots such as QianMen, GuLouDaJie, and HouHai. Subway line 10 will take you to ChaoYang district, which is the developing business sector. Here, you will find the most modern high risers and shopping centers, concentrated around TuanJieHu station and GuoMao station.

Some area of interest include SanLiTun, which is where most foreigners go for past time, thus with countless bars and clubs. If you are an artsy type, the 798 and MOMA theatre are great weekend travel spots. Both places are located at the Eastern part of the city and will require maybe an hour to get to. It is definitely worth a visit though, especially 798, where you will have more than 50+ galleries to see. Check transportation method from Sogou or Baidu.



In conclusion

I had an extremely memorable exchange experience at Tsinghua University and much of it can be accredited to those locals that I have met. These include my instructor, who gave me valuable advice on my studies and was the most generous in allowing me to learn those techniques available in the laboratory. I also befriended many local students and they were more than happy to assist. I think in order to maximize your exchange experience, do not be afraid to interact with the professors at THU and make as many local friends as possible and in that way, you will really take part in an adventure which is only possible through the exchange program.