

My China-Experience

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1 Introduction

In this report I review my stay at the Tsinghua University in Beijing during the WS2019/20 and partly the SS2020. At the time of writing this, my exchange to China has already over for more than half a year. It's close enough to still have the memories present in my mind, but on the other hand, enough time has passed to process my experiences while studying abroad.

I pursue a couple of goals while writing this. Firstly, I want to take the chance to review my time in China and at Tsinghua. Secondly, I hope that this report might be useful for future exchange students. That's why I've included as much practical information as possible. Last but not least, I hope that the portrayal of my experiences will be entertaining to read.

Naturally, this report will be most useful for people with a background similar to mine. So I want to briefly introduce myself. I'm a graduate student in the physics department of Heidelberg University, specializing in mathematical physics. Currently I'm in my 4th semester. As an undergraduate I studied in Heidelberg as well. I started learning Chinese (i.e. Mandarin) around the time when I began the preparation for the exchange in 2018, so when I arrived in China I had learned Chinese for about 15 months. During this time, I had reached a level of about HSK3 (what I would consider to be in between A2 and B1 level).

My academic situation and my rather poor Chinese proficiency were the main factors that influenced my decision to go to Tsinghua, rather than another university like Peking University. I will delve deeper into this in the section on preparation.

Originally I had planned to stay at Tsinghua for a full year, but unfortunately my stay had been cut short by the Covid-19 pandemic. I've decided to dedicate one section to my personal experience with this situation and how the administration at Tsinghua handled it.

This report should best be read on an electronic device since the images and especially the maps might be much too small in a printed version. However, the resolution is high enough so you can zoom in a lot on a computer.

First of all, I want to thank my parents, who've supported me my whole life and in particular during the whole exchange process. My friend Tim Holzschuh who helped me a lot with the preparations, as well as Louisa Konrad for her helpful input and proofreading of this report. A special thanks to Prof. Johannes Walcher and Prof. Matthias Bartelmann for recommending me for the exchange, as well as Dr. Dietlind Wünsche, who organizes all the exchange programs with China and Taiwan at the University and was a great support throughout the whole process. Furthermore, I want to thank the Heidelberg University for making the exchange possible, and the Baden-Württemberg Stiftung for supporting me by awarding me a scholarship.

For further questions you may contact me under the following email address:
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2 Preparation

If you are a student at Heidelberg University who is interested in participating in an exchange, the first place you should look at is [this website¹](https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/de/studium/studium-international/studium-im-ausland) where you can find all partner universities, the requirements for the application and the deadlines for the applications. The specific details for the program with Tsinghua can be found [here²](#).

¹<https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/de/studium/studium-international/studium-im-ausland>, last access: 10.01.2021.

²<https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/de/studium/studium-international/studium-im-ausland/austauschprogramme-asien/tsinghua-university-peking>, last accessed: 10.01.2021.

2.1 Application process

Most of the information I give here can be found on the website mentioned above, so this will just be a brief summary. The application for Tsinghua and, as far as I know, all other universities in **mainland** China require the following material:

- Application form with passport photo
- Detailed curriculum vitae (CV) (ca. 1 page)
- 2 recommendation letters (Original)
- Motivation letter (ca. 1-2 pages)
- Transcript (Original)
- Language certificate: Chinese or English (Original)
- Bachelor's diploma (copy)
- High school diploma (copy)

The way I see it, the most important parts of the application are the CV and the motivation letter, which should therefore be written really carefully. Especially for the motivation letter, I took a lot of time reflecting on what my goals would be during my time in China.

Most professors will be willing to give you a recommendation letter, and while I think that the recommendation letter won't affect the application in a negative way, a particularly nice recommendation letter will be a plus for sure. If there's a professor you have a good connection to (the adviser of your bachelor thesis for instance), you have a higher chance of getting an outstanding recommendation letter.

Tsinghua doesn't require one of the major certificates like TOEFL or IELTS,

so a language certificate from the [Zentrales Sprachlabor](#)³ will do. You can send a mail to a teacher⁴ of the language you want to be examined in and they will help you to make an appointment for your exam. Be aware that it can take about 2-3 weeks to get an appointment, so don't wait too long to make the appointment.

The deadline for the application usually is in November. Once your application is complete, you have good chances in getting invited to an interview which will ultimately decide the success of the application. It's a good idea to be well informed about current news and controversial topics concerning your target country. Below, there are some questions that have been asked in earlier interviews:

- What made you choose China as your destination?
- How do you assess the current relationship between China and Japan?
- How do you plan to represent Heidelberg University as a guest at Tsinghua and in China?

As some of the questions may be targeted towards your CV and motivation letter, you should be able to give some insights beyond what you wrote. Furthermore, I recommend reading through your application again before your interview.

Shortly after the new year, the university notifies the applicants of the results.

2.2 Before setting off

Once you've successfully applied, you can start with your preparation. Let's start with the obvious things. Make sure you have a passport which is

³<https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/zsl/index.html>, last accessed: 10.01.2021.

⁴<https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/zsl/kontakt.html>, last accessed: 10.01.2021.

valid at least until 6 months after your intended return date. Also check out the recommended vaccinations for your target country⁵. In my opinion, you should see your doctor at least 2 months before your departure, since some vaccinations need more than one injection.

Furthermore, it's important that you have easy access to cash while you are in China since most Chinese stores don't accept the credit cards common in Europe (Master Card, Visa Card, etc.). As an exchange student you are able to open a bank account which you can link to Wechat and Alipay. With these setup paying will be super convenient. However, I still would recommend carrying some cash with you at all times.

Opening an account at the DKB was very helpful as it allows you to withdraw cash at any ATM in China at the current exchange rate without any additional fees and also provides you a free Visa card linked to your account.

After I opened an account at the Bank of China, I would regularly transfer money to it by going to an ATM of the Bank of China, using my DKB Visa card to get cash and putting the money in my Bank of China account at the same ATM. That way there were no fees and the money was available almost immediately. I would strongly recommend to do it that way. From what I've heard from other international students, that seems to be the best way to transfer your money to your Chinese account.

After getting admitted to the program, Tsinghua will send you some documents and you need to **register online before mid-March!** I want to stress this, because I was unaware of this for quite a while and you really shouldn't miss that deadline. For the registration you will need a passport style photo for your Tsinghua students ID. There are also some other documents needed. Most of these you already needed for your applications at Heidelberg, so it won't be lots of extra work. One additional document you'll need is

⁵<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/laender/china-node/chinasicherheit/200466>, last accessed: 10.01.2021.

a confirmation letter from your university for which you can contact Dr. Wünsche⁶. After you've finished your online registration, you need to send the original documents to Tsinghua. You will need to send the documents to the following address (check that again, in case the address changes):

Visiting Programs Room B431-1,
Lee Shau Kee Science and Technology Building
Academic Affairs Office (教务处)
Tsinghua University
Haidian District, Beijing 100084
P.R. China

There is a very big exchange program between the RWTH Aachen and Tsinghua for a double degree program, so you can find lots of useful information on their website too. You might find [this document](#)⁷ useful, where many of the relevant people and addresses are listed.

After your application has been processed, Tsinghua will send you your admission letter, visa form and the relevant information on how to proceed from there. After getting the visa form you can apply for your visa. This can take over a month, so make sure you apply for the visa in time.

The application for the dorms opens around June, and you should apply for the dorm as soon as it does, otherwise the dorm rooms might be gone and you'll have to look for a room outside of campus. A little drawback of the dorms is that all guests have to leave before 11 pm, so you won't be able to hang around with your friends inside the dorms until late. Guests have to register at the desk in the lobby of the dorm, so you will get a call if they

⁶<https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/studium/kontakt/auslandsamt/aaa.html>, last accessed: 23.01.2021.

⁷https://www.maschinenbau.rwth-aachen.de/global/show_document.asp?id=aaaaaaaaabclcys, last accessed: 10.01.2021.

haven't left in time. Apart from that little inconvenience, the dorms are great and I would strongly recommend applying for them, especially since it's cheaper than booking a room outside campus.

I booked my flight relatively late since I wanted to book a round trip to save some money. That didn't really work out due to Covid, but I still think it's the better option. My visa in China was valid until 2020/07/15, so I booked the flight together with an option to change the flight with no additional fee, so that I still would be flexible on my return to Germany. I booked my flight with Etihad and had to transfer once; Air China offers regular non-stop connections.

2.3 Language and Culture

Switching to the obvious: People in China speak Chinese.

First of all „Chinese“ is not a very homogeneous language. Just as most other languages, Chinese has quite a lot of dialects which can differ quite a lot from the standard dialect (Mandarin). Some dialects are really just different languages. For instance, even native speakers can't understand Cantonese, the dialect spoken in Guangdong Province and Hong Kong. But no matter how different the dialects sound, most of them share the same character based writing system, which in my opinion is the true soul of the Chinese language. It always fascinated me that no matter how big the differences between the dialects are, they are always written the same way.

There are a lot of sources to learn Chinese and about the Chinese language, so why do I mention it here? The main reason is, that I want to emphasize that if one decides to live in China, one should definitely learn some Chinese. Why do I think that?

Firstly, it obviously makes your life in China easier. In general, the level of English among the Chinese population is quite poor. Especially if you go

out of the metropolitan areas like Shanghai and Beijing, you can't expect to get along with English very well. If you are very adventurous that might not bother you, but if you don't even know the basics you will have a hard time. Let me illustrate the problem. I've been to Romania before and don't speak Romanian, I think very few of the readers do. So imagine you are traveling there and you are looking for a toilet, which has probably happened to all of us before. Even if you don't speak any Romanian, you might guess that „Toaletă“ means toilet. Now try to guess which of the following is toilet in Chinese: „飞机场“, „卫生间“, „面包“. The correct answer is ”卫生间“, but there is no way to figure that out if you don't at least know some Chinese. Secondly, it opens a lot of doors for you. This builds on the point mentioned above, but I want to put special emphasis on this. The advantages you get beyond the pure utility are manifold. In general, Chinese people are very happy and maybe also somewhat impressed if you know some Chinese, and you can make a lot of contacts from that. As a European, I was fortunate that the people around me were generally interested in me, so it was very easy to start conversations. I heard a lot of interesting stories from all kinds of people during my time there. Unfortunately, my Chinese is not that great, so it was sometimes hard for me to find the right words or get what people were trying to say to me, but this always motivated me to keep practicing and improve, and it was at least good enough to talk to a lot of people. Especially within the older generation, there are lots of people who can only speak the local dialect and their spoken Mandarin is quite poor. In these cases, I would not understand anything at all. Occasionally, that happens to Chinese people too though, so it's nothing to feel bad about. I once witnessed how a Chinese tourist in a small minority village in Guangxi province tried to speak to a local man and there was no way for the two to communicate. But that's the exception, you are usually quite well off with Mandarin. Chinese does not just open doors to people but also to their culture, as they

are very entangled. The language contains a lot of history that can be found in the many idioms that are much more common than in western languages. Understanding them also helps you learn about the history of China. I also think that at least trying to pick up some basic Mandarin shows some respect for the country.

Last but not least, you should learn Mandarin just because you have the best opportunity to do so, while you are in China. Every language you speak will benefit you greatly, because it enables you to communicate with many different people, access new sources and looks great on your CV. Furthermore, Chinese is a fun and unique language to learn, so you should make use of the opportunity living in an environment where you can naturally improve on a daily basis.

If you are interested in Chinese culture you might also be interested in [GCC Heidelberg](#)⁸, a student association with the goal to improve the intercultural exchange between Chinese and German students by organizing events like tandem evenings, game nights and talks. I've been a member myself since 2018. For me it was a great opportunity to get in touch with the Chinese culture and people before going to China.

2.4 Funding and Scholarships

A big concern for many students when going abroad, is managing the costs of the exchange. You definitely want to make sure that your costs are covered before you leave. The good news is, that the daily expenses in China are a bit under what you would need in Germany, although in the big cities like Beijing and Shanghai the difference is not that much. Especially the rent is absurdly high in Beijing nowadays so I recommend renting a room in the dormitories. It's not that cheap (2500 RMB per month), but quite

⁸<https://gccheidelberg.wordpress.com/>, last accessed: 10.01.2021.

affordable for Beijing. Moreover, you get your room cleaned three times a week and your bed sheets are changed once a week. Also the canteen is quite cheap. For me an average meal cost about 12 RMB (~1,50€).

Public transportation in Beijing is really convenient. The subway has 16 lines (in 2020) and one ride costs at most 5 RMB. Taxis are pretty cheap too and for short distances you can use the numerous public bikes. You will probably need some extra money during your stay for your plane tickets, insurance, traveling, shopping (I bought a lot of stuff while being in China, so think about how to get everything back to Germany right from the beginning) etc. China is a country with so many different aspects and unique things to discover, that you need to get around to get an impression of the many sides of this huge country, in my opinion. Money shouldn't be the factor that prevents you from having the best experience possible. A scholarship can help you cover the extra costs that you will have. I'm aware of three good options:

1. When you've been admitted to an exchange program that's organized by the „Abteilung für Internationale Beziehungen“ (Department for International Relations) you get the opportunity to apply for the **Baden-Württemberg Stipendium** issued by the Baden-Württemberg-Stiftung. I was very lucky to get this scholarship for my time abroad and to me it meant the freedom to have the best experience possible. How much money you get from the scholarship and how long you will be supported depends on your destination. For me it was around 4800€. Apart from the financial support you get access to the community of current and past scholarship holders who will happily share their know-how and experiences. The community in Heidelberg is quite active but unluckily due to Covid-19, there haven't been any in-person events since I've returned to Germany so far, but I hope I can enjoy this part of the scholarship after we overcome the pandemic.

You can get the application form at the information desk for studying abroad on the first floor of Seminarstraße 2.

2. An attractive scholarship for studying abroad is awarded by the **DAAD** (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst). You can find the relevant information on [this website⁹](#). The biggest drawback is that the deadline for the application is before the deadline for the application at Heidelberg University, so you need to be very well prepared if you want to apply for this scholarship. The deadline is around August or September, so take care of it in time if you want to apply for it. The scholarship offers quite a bit more compared to the one provided by the Baden-Württemberg Stiftung. For example, they grant you financial aid for the flights and the scholarship runs for one full year.
3. One more option you have is the **CSC Scholarship** awarded by the Chinese Scholarship Council. To my knowledge, you can apply for the scholarship directly at the Heidelberg University. The scholarship is quite attractive as well. It includes a monthly payment of 3000 RMB and the dorm fees. You can find all information on [this website¹⁰](#).

2.5 Important Apps

A fact that most foreigners know about China is that Facebook, Twitter, Google, Wikipedia, etc. are all banned. What that really means only becomes clear, when you experience it. Especially as an Android user, be aware that your Google play store and Google maps won't work in China (Apple users might have it slightly better). WhatsApp will work, but some

⁹<https://www2.daad.de/ausland/studieren/stipendium/de/70-stipendien-finden-und-bewerben/?status=&target=18&subjectGrps=&intention=&daad=&q=&page=1&detail=57503530>, last access: 10.01.2021.

¹⁰<https://www.chinesescholarshipcouncil.com/>, last accessed: 10.01.2021.

features like sending photos won't (at least it was like that, when I was there). To help you get around this, I'll present some apps I often used. I tried to include at least one Chinese app as well as one non-Chinese app for all the points listed below.

Search engine: Google is completely banned in China. However most other common search engines worked fine. I often used Bing. If you are looking for a Chinese search engine, Baidu is usually the first choice. WeChat (see below) also has an integrated search engine, which is frequently used by most of my Chinese friends who say it's the best searching method.

Communication: An app you will definitely need is WeChat. Naively, one could think it's just a Chinese alternative to WhatsApp, when really it's so much more.

At first glance WeChat does what any messenger app should do. But there are some things you can do with WeChat that are far beyond what you would expect, such as paying almost everywhere, transferring money, searching the internet, getting news updates, using the laundry machine in your dorm, etc. You basically can't survive without the app. Especially in the University, a lot of things are handled over WeChat. Instead of a mailing list you have a WeChat group where all the information for the class is provided. Handing in assignments can also be done via WeChat. Announcements of talks in your institute and information about activities on campus can also be found via WeChat. Probably one of the most important things to help immerse yourself into the life at Tsinghua is to get into the right WeChat groups. Otherwise you will find that it is hard to get information. The downside is that you will regularly find over 100 unread messages from the various groups.

Warning: I once had the problem that my WeChat account got blocked for adding too many new contacts and the accounts of my parents here in Germany got blocked for not being trustworthy (I guess the issue was that

they had no Chinese citizens in their contacts). To get around that problem I strongly recommend setting up your WeChat way before your departure and adding a friend who is a Chinese citizen with a bank account connected to their WeChat. In case your WeChat gets blocked, this friend can help you unlock your account. Usually, this issue doesn't occur anymore after you have connected your WeChat to a bank account.

Payment: Credit cards are rarely accepted in China, usually just in places many foreigners go to, like big shopping centers. Paying with cash is possible but you should be prepared for the annoyed expression on the cashier's face. Nowadays payment in China is almost exclusively done by phone. As mentioned above, you can connect WeChat to your bank account and use it to pay. This usually is done by scanning a QR-code. You will find that a lot of things in China are done via scanning a QR-code (for example the phone I bought there has a function to share Wifi networks via a QR code, which I think is a pretty cool feature). The other important payment app is AliPay (支付宝). To be honest, I'm afraid you will need both. The feature to send money in your WeChat chats is often used when you split the bill with friends, share the fee for badminton courts, etc. On the other hand you need AliPay (the mobile Payment service of the Alibaba Group) to pay on Taobao (see next section), which alone is reason enough to use it. Moreover, the supermarket in the C-building is a T-mall (天猫) which belongs to the Alibaba Group so you can only use AliPay there, and not WeChat pay (a product of the Tencent Holding). AliPay also has a lot more convenient features. You can top up your phone account, campus card, buy movie tickets (often with discount), train tickets, etc.

Shopping: For online shopping there is Taobao (淘宝) . You won't need anything else, since you can find anything and everything there (some things you might only find by searching for the Chinese name though). Chinese people order a lot online. A friend once described it like this: „If you are

missing anything, just go on Taobao and order it because it's cheap and easy. Often you don't even need it when it arrives (which often is already the next day; it's really fast), but because it's so cheap, you just keep ordering more". The consumer behavior in China is quite different from Germany. China made paying so convenient to the point where one doesn't notice how much they are spending, which I never expected before.

Transportation: There is no comparison between getting around in a Chinese city and the European cities I know. The subway system in cities like Beijing and Shanghai is fantastic and there is probably no place in the city more than 20 walking minutes away from the next subway station. Baidu maps is a great tool to help you find your connection, especially when you have to change lines, the app tells you exactly which platform you have to go to, which exit to use, which direction you need to go, etc. Another benefit is that I was forced to learn some rather exotic characters, since the app is only in Chinese and the names of places are not always the most common names. An alternative maps app, which I personally didn't use as much in China, but which is very convenient in general is maps.me. It allows you to download maps and use them offline. Especially when you haven't set up a contract for your phone yet, this is super convenient.

The places you can't reach conveniently by subway are most likely covered by buses. So far so good, it's not very different from metropolises in Europe (except the transportation is a lot cheaper (on average 4 RMB/0.50 Euro per ride)). You can use an app or a prepaid card to pay for the subway and the bus, but remember that if you don't have an electronic payment method set up you need to pay cash.

You can also very conveniently take taxis, which are quite affordable in China in general. While in Beijing they are much more expensive than smaller cities, it's still not even close to European taxi prices. Coming back to the topic of this section, there is an app for the alternative to ordinary taxis called DiDi

(滴滴). You can order ordinary taxis as well as private drivers there, who'll pick you up anywhere you want. After choosing your route, you will shortly get a notice about the color and number of the car, and how long it will take to arrive. The app shows you the route the vehicle should take and offers the option to send an emergency call with one click (I didn't hear about any occasion where someone would have needed that, but especially some female friends said that they feel more secure because of that feature).

Maybe you have seen some bike sharing stations popping up throughout Germany in the past few years. In China the concept of bike sharing has already reached dimensions that I couldn't have imagined before. There are a lot of different companies who provide public bikes. Trying to use some of the public bikes for the first time taught me the difference between having a residence permission and having a Chinese passport. To prevent misconduct, you need to verify your account to use the bikes. By default this is done through your ID card number, however you only have that number if you have a Chinese ID card. Fortunately, some companies have addressed this problem by adding an option to verify your account with a foreign passport. Be aware that the verification process takes about one day, so if you plan using bikes, best thing is just to do the verification as soon as possible. The bikes I used the most are called 青桔 (qīngjú). Their bikes are turquoise/green and I think they were the easiest to find in the city. The other company I used was Mobike. They also offer an English version of their app, which might make it more convenient for anyone who is not as proficient in Chinese. There are no fixed locations as to where you need to park them, you can park them just everywhere. To find them there usually is a map provided in the respective app.

Eating out and Traveling: Maybe you have talked to Chinese people living abroad before. If you asked them to tell you what they miss most about China, I bet the majority would tell you it's the Chinese food, and as

soon as you have been to China, you will understand why.

I always liked the canteens at Tsinghua, but it's much more in the modern Chinese spirit to order 外卖(wàimài = take out). There are lots of apps to order food with. The most used probably is ele.me (饿了么) . As always you can just order the food and immediately pay for it in the app. I think that convenience is the single most important selling point in China. Remember your Chinese friend who misses Chinese food. If you were to ask him about traveling recommendations in China it's likely that he will tell you about some city and immediately after this about the local dishes. It has always been very impressive to me how much Chinese people know about the diverse foods from all the different regions of the country, and indeed traveling is strongly connected to food in China. So when planning a trip it is worth doing some research about the local cuisine. I mainly used [trip.com](#) to book train tickets, hotels, etc. From time to time [booking.com](#) was useful as well. While traveling an app called 美团 (měituán) proved to be very useful. It's similar to [Tripadvisor](#). You can find recommendations for restaurants, traveling highlights, order take out and much more. Using this app to order you often can get a discount.

Entertainment: Among all the banned websites there also is YouTube, and if there is a popular website that is banned in China, the Chinese Tech industry is not shy to develop an alternative to that. In my opinion Tencent Video (腾讯视频), iQIYI (爱奇艺) and Youku (优酷) are the best video platforms. They are not only a replacement for YouTube but also for platforms like Netflix (since you can also find a lot of popular Chinese TV shows there, some for free, some not). For music I recommend NetEase Music (网易云音乐). Using Chinese video platforms, listening to Chinese music and learning some Chinese songs is helpful for immersing yourself into Chinese culture and get more exposure to the language. You probably will end up at a Karaoke place at least once, so better have some Chinese songs prepared.

If you really want to impress your Chinese friends, 生僻字 might be a good song to learn.

VPN: The only thing I really needed and couldn't replace with a website available in China was Wikipedia. Luckily, our University here in Heidelberg provides a [VPN¹¹](#) (the funny thing is, that you can't find the page when you are searching for „VPN Uni Heidelberg“ on Bing in China).

After setting up your phone, you are ready to go out without having to fear getting lost.

3 Campus Life

3.1 Arriving at Tsinghua

Arriving at Tsinghua was very exciting to me. The campus is huge, and you can feel quite lost when you are searching for your classroom. Luckily everyone is very happy to help you. Just ask people around and your life will become a lot easier.

I arrived at Beijing Capital International Airport, which is in the North-East of Beijing. I highly recommend taking a taxi from the Airport to Tsinghua. Chances are your driver won't speak any English, so in case you don't know any Chinese, an easy option is to write down the place, you want to go:

清华大学

紫荆19号楼

This is the Zijing international students dormitory no. 19 (no. 2 on the map in Fig. ?? below. It may be useful, to look at the map digitally. Feel free to contact me, if you want the pdf file), the first place you have to go to when arriving at Tsinghua. After checking in you get your room in one of

¹¹<https://www.urz.uni-heidelberg.de/de/vpn>, last accessed: 10.01.2021.



Fig. 1: Pavilion in the Tsinghua Garden inside the campus

the dorms for international students which are the buildings Zijing No. 19 - 23 right next to the North-East Gate (东北门). My room was Zijing No. 19 room 435. The Zijing area is the living area for many students and the center of life outside of studies. The most important facility for your daily needs is the C-Building (no. 3 on the map in Fig. ??). There you can find a supermarket, ATMs, a Bank of China branch, a hairdresser, etc.

I arrived in China on August 21st, 2019, two weeks before the official moving in time for the dormitory on campus. I'm really glad I made that decision, because during that time I was very flexible to travel around China (which is not usually the case for tourists) and get used to the country. It also showed me how different the life on campus was to the life outside. Whether or not

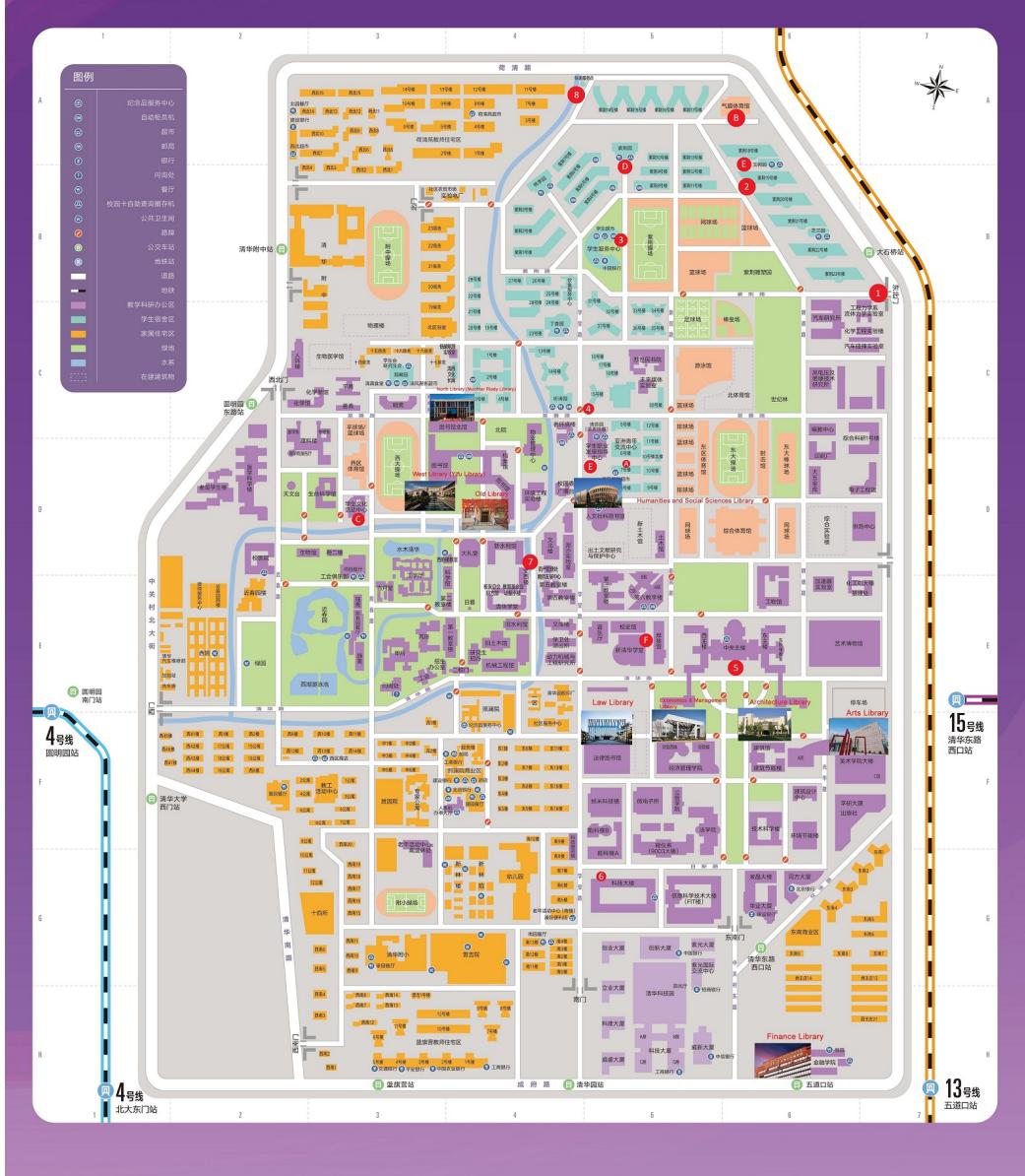


Fig. 2: Map of the Tsinghua campus

you check in on campus immediately after your arrival, there are some things you need to get out of the way first. Let's first talk about your best friend in China: your phone. Whether you like it or not, you will use it a lot. The first

thing you will want is a phone contract. Basically, there are 3 companies you can choose from: China Mobile (中国移动), China Telecom (中国电信) and China Unicom (中国联通). It doesn't really matter which one you choose, but it's definitely worth checking the special offers. At the start of the new semester, you can often find 1 year contracts for around 300 RMB (~40€) with 20 GB of data. 20 GB might sound a lot, but considering that the mobile internet often works better than the Wifi provided in the dormitory, I think it is totally worth it, especially because your monthly Wifi data volume is restricted (25 GB/month). I got my contract from China Unicom (No. 7 on the map in Fig. ??; unfortunately the map is not very accurate here so you might want to check for 中国联通 on e.g. Baidu maps again to find the China Unicom branch on the campus).

Another thing you have to get done is your health check. I personally had no problems with the check up, but I heard that in Germany it's a bit troublesome, since they don't have all the equipment in one place. So you have to go to different locations to get everything done. Moreover, if you are unlucky, your test won't be accepted by the Chinese authorities and you'll have to do it again. Therefore, I would recommend to do the test in China. The place you'll have to go to is

北京市海淀区德政路10号

You can find all information on the following [website¹²](#). If you have the chance, go early. Since all exchange students in the Haidian district who didn't do the check-up back home have to go to this hospital, it will take 3-4 hours if you go there after the official move-in dates, to do check-ups that take around 15 minutes all together.

Once you have done your health check you are ready for the official registration.

¹²http://is.tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/issc/11882/2018/20180717105543702462133/20180717105543702462133_.html, last accessed: 10.01.2021.

The procedure is not complicated, but there are two things I want to address specifically.

When studying at Tsinghua you need a Chinese name. As almost all teachers and classmates will call you by your Chinese name, it's maybe worth taking some time with a Chinese friend to choose a good name. I didn't do that beforehand so I was just given the Chinese name 蓝正龙 (lǎn zhèng lóng). I got more and more happy with the name, so I think I was lucky. There is an actor from Taiwan called 蓝正龙, so I can be sure that it is an authentic name. I personally don't like transcriptions of names that just scream "foreigner", but that's a matter of taste. For Raphael it would be something like 拉斐尔 (lā fēi ěr).

The second thing I want to address can spare you quite some inconveniences. On registration day, they ask you to hand in your passport, which they will send to the police station for you. This kind of registration always needs to be done when you go to China, even if you check into a hotel. So what's the problem? Well, you also need your passport to open your bank account. Let me explain a bit more. Every exchange student at Tsinghua automatically gets a Bank of China account. You get handed out the card and information material during the welcoming ceremony (held at the place marked with 5 on the map in Fig. ??). There is a notice which tells you when you should go to the Bank of China branch in the C-building and that you should bring your passport and admission notice. Unfortunately, for me that date was after the registration date, so when I went to the appointment they told me, they were very sorry, but I had to wait until I get back my passport. So I waited around 1 month. I'm assuming they only give back the passports after they finish the registration for all incoming students for that year, as I really can't think of any other explanation as to why it should take a whole month to finish. So I had no bank account, hence no WeChat Pay nor AliPay, and I can tell you, trying to get around with cash in China, especially on campus is

not fun at all. To avoid making the same mistake as me, just tell the people on registration day that you need to keep your passport for a few more days and that you will bring it to them later, just showing it to them without leaving it there, and only handing it in after you get your bank account set up. It will make your life a lot easier.

What I always loved about Tsinghua was the huge variety of food. The campus has around 17 canteens in total, some cheaper ones, some more expensive (and certainly some more delicious than others). For some strange reason, exchange students can't use their student ID to buy food in the canteen. To obtain a canteen card, you need to bring your admission notice to the office marked 4 on the map in Fig. ???. You also need to go there every time to top up your card. It only happened to me once that I was in the canteen by myself without having enough money on my card for the food I ordered. The student behind me helped me out, and I just paid her back with my phone right away. In general, the students are really friendly and will help you with almost anything if you ask them.

3.2 Studying at Tsinghua

Tsinghua has two kind of programs. A program for visiting and exchange students and one for language students. On registration day you can choose which department you want to study in. It doesn't matter what your major at your home university is, it's even possible to choose to do the language program even if you come to Tsinghua as an exchange student. I chose the mathematics department because of the courses offered. You can choose a maximum of 20 credits each semester and out of these, 8 credits at most outside your department (1 credit in China is comparable to 2 credits in Germany). My impression was that the workload for one course in China was a bit more than in Germany.

For exchange students there are mainly two groups: the ones who can take courses in Chinese and the ones who can't. If you belong to the first group, you can ignore what follows. Otherwise, you should check carefully, if Tsinghua is the right choice for you. In general, undergraduate courses are almost exclusively in Chinese. Some business related courses that are regularly visited by exchange students from Europe and the US, who might have some stricter regulated programs, are held in English as well, but generally you can't really expect a great supply of courses in English. From what I've heard, the courses that are held in English and are visited by lots of exchange students tend to be easier than other courses. If you stay for a whole year and your Chinese is around HSK3 (which was about what I had when I went to China), I'm confident that you'd be able to follow some courses in Chinese in your second semester after focusing mostly on language learning in your first semester. It might still be tough though.

For graduate courses, you have better chances in finding interesting courses given in English, but it depends a lot on the subject. If the area of research is very international and the department has many professors from outside of China, you might be lucky. That was the case for me. All courses I took were given by professors from the [Yau Mathematical Science Center](#)¹³(YMSC). You will find that many members of the institute are non-Chinese.

I will briefly delve a bit deeper into the structure and offers of the science center, as well as the courses I took at Tsinghua. If you are not interested in mathematics and/or mathematical physics, feel free to skip this paragraph. The YMSC was founded in 2009 by Shing-Tung Yau (丘成桐). The center covers a wide range of research in pure mathematics, and is especially strong in geometry and number theory. As a student the wide range of courses offered at the institute provides a great opportunity getting insight into current research. The courses at the Yau Center are not part of the regular

¹³<http://ymsc.tsinghua.edu.cn/en>, last accessed: 10.01.2021.

schedule at the university and you can't get credits for them. This is partly because the organization of these informal courses is much easier for the lecturer (no exam, no obligatory homework, etc.) and partly, because most people who are attending the course are already doing their PhD degree, so they only need to take very few courses for credits. Many of the PhD students I met had already started their PhD after finishing their Bachelor's degree, so the system is much more similar to that of the US than to Germany's. Actually, there were many undergraduate students in quite advanced courses, which really impressed me. In general, you always felt that every single Chinese student you met was among the smartest students you could find in China. Without any doubt, I definitely felt the pressure that Chinese students have in that kind of environment. There was just one other foreigner whose specialization was kind of similar to mine, and so we had some courses together. I think most exchange students don't go through the experience of doubting oneself and feeling like everyone else in the room is smarter than you, but that was really how I felt like from time to time. It was frustrating and motivating at the same time. After talking to some of my Chinese classmates, they told me that they felt exactly like I do, but for them this pressure started from when they were in high school.

All in all I didn't take many courses for credits during my time at Tsinghua, mostly because the non-credit courses at the Yau-Center were much more interesting. The courses I took for credit were:

- Supersymmetry and Supergravity (Prof. Mauriceo Romo)
- Mirror Symmetry (Prof. Jie Zhou (周杰))
- Rigid Cohomology (Prof. Hansheng Diao (刁晗生))

Some other courses I attended include

- Geometric Representation Theory

- Motivic Integration

The courses were quite advanced and I had to put in quite a lot of work to keep up, but nevertheless the examinations were pretty easy. None of the courses had a real exam, but we had to hand in final reports about a topic, which we could choose from a given pool. I wrote reports on „Electro-Magnetic Duality with view towards the Geometric Langlands Correspondence“ and on „Comparison between Rigid and Crystalline Cohomology“. I really liked the possibility of using the knowledge obtained in the courses for a new project, since I have the feeling that I understand stuff so much better through working with it. It was also a great preparation for a Master’s Thesis. However, the time put into such a report was a lot more than the time one would spend on preparing for an exam.

Especially while preparing my report for the course „Supersymmetry and Supergravity“ I talked a lot to Prof. Mauriceo Romo and I’m really grateful for the time he spent explaining all kind of things to me. All in all, I had the impression that the professors at Tsinghua had less duties outside their research and could have longer office hours (they often even complained that nobody was showing up).

At this point I want to mention something that bothered me quite a bit. I never quite overcame the feeling that students in China don’t learn how to give proper presentations. I only experienced my classmates giving talks in English, and many of them obviously felt uncomfortable speaking it. That’s quite a common phenomenon in China; people understand English very well and their reading and writing skills are really good, speaking, on the other hand, is not their biggest strength, and paradoxically, the better the people know English, the more they seem afraid of speaking it. However when I talked to some friends at Tsinghua, they told me that the presentations done in Chinese aren’t particularly good either. I guess the reason is that there is not much focus on giving presentations in Chinese schools. I don’t want

to do injustice to my classmates, the content of the presentations was very good. The issues I saw were mostly concerning their body language and the structure of the presentation. For example I often wished that they could give a brief summary of what was said after a technical discussion. I actually also noticed that when taking classes given by Chinese professors. The style of the lectures is a bit different from those in Germany, they are a bit dry and the information is more dense. That leads to more work outside of class, which is further amplified by the fact that it's common for the students to read lots of additional literature, besides the material covered in class and the homework that is to be handed in on a regular basis.

Personally, I prefer the lecturing style in Germany. For me it's less stressful and I have more time to think about stuff and to understand the material presented in class on a deeper level. On the other hand, I was impressed by the amount of knowledge my classmates were able to assemble in quite a short time and I'm sure I obtained more knowledge in my courses at Tsinghua than I would have in Heidelberg, but at the cost of a deeper understanding of the material. Of course, with more knowledge, you will naturally understand many of the deep connections in mathematics and physics, so I can't really say which is better. In the end, it's personal preference. In any case, I'm very grateful for the opportunity to study in another educational system and I highly recommend it to everyone. It really helped me understand how I learn best and what my strengths as a student are. Moreover, during my stay at Tsinghua, I was able to figure out which direction I want to follow in my studies in the next years.

For the ones interested: While studying the connection between the geometric Langlands correspondence and $N=4$ SYM discovered by Kapustin and Witten, I got a first insight to the beautiful connections between physics and number theory that might exist. My interest now lies in generalized approaches to physics using the language of higher category theory and derived geometry.

Using these tools I want to understand the underlying geometric structures of physical theories, in particular String Theory and general Gauge Theories and eventually transfer the physical formalism to other geometries than the usual real analytic/complex geometry used in physics. I'm most interested in arithmetic geometry since it could give rise to new interesting connections between number theory and physics.

The only courses I took outside my department were the Chinese language courses offered by the school. I started at an intermediate level (中级汉语) and the course was actually really hard for me, but the combination of the environment and the intense course helped my Chinese a lot.

3.3 Outside of Class

Depending on what your ambitions and priorities are during your time at Tsinghua, you will be very busy with your school curriculum. The abundant offer of university clubs and activities will definitely overwhelm you and you won't have any idea as to how you could possibly fit everything you have and want to do in your limited time. The bad news is, I can't really help you with that and there is no way to take part in everything you want to. Good news is, you won't get bored (except maybe in some of your classes). So how did I choose to spend my time at Tsinghua? Since my studies were really exhausting, I tried to keep the hobbies I knew would be relaxing for me. Among these are playing piano, badminton and table tennis. Let me briefly talk about where one can do these activities. I have included the Tsinghua map below again for easier reference.

The first hobby I picked up was badminton. During one of my very first days at Tsinghua, even before the lectures started, I came across a student carrying a badminton racket, so I asked him (in Chinese) where I could play badminton and he immediately started to explain to me how I could book a

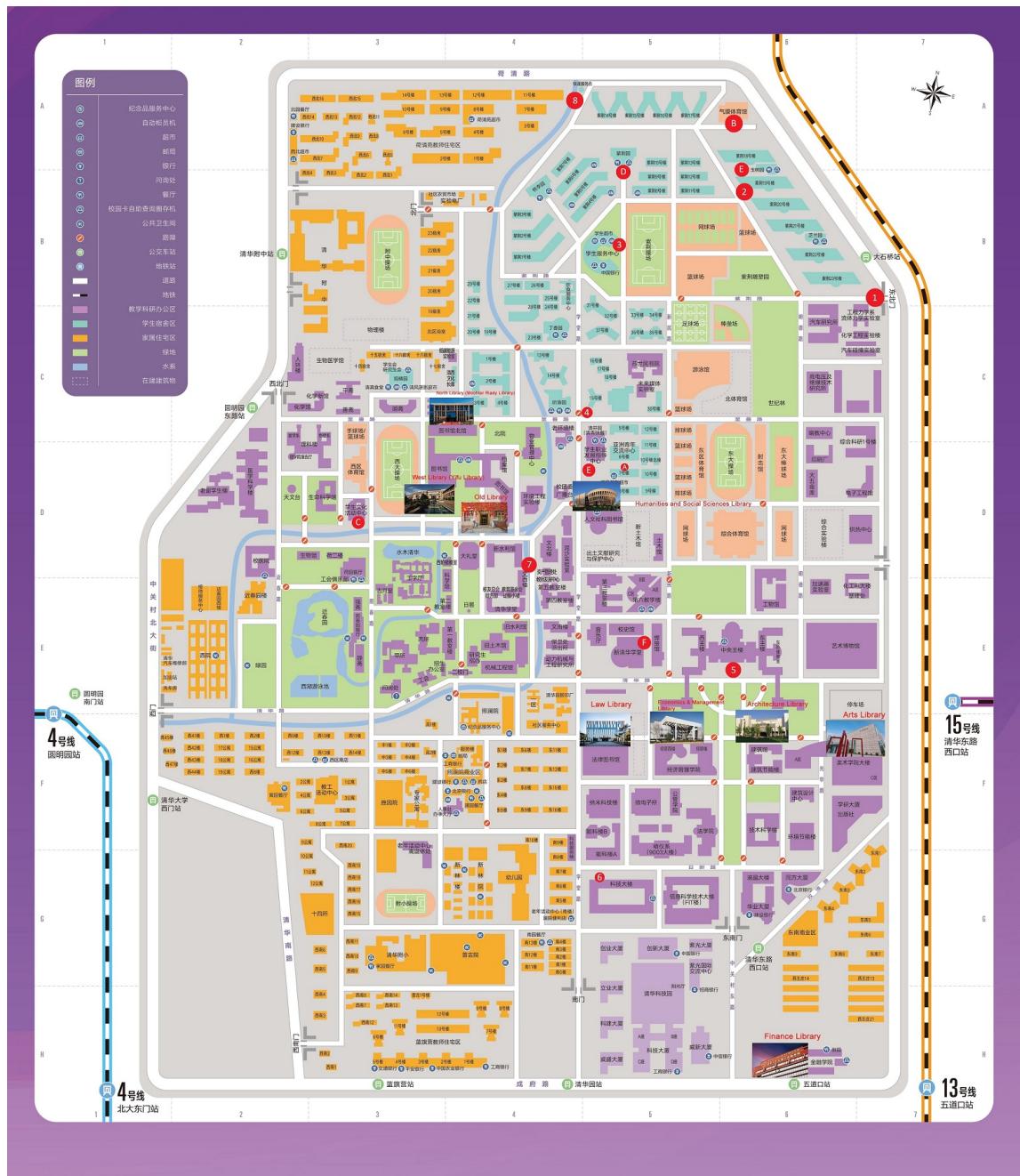


Fig. 3: The Tsinghua campus, again.

field (in English and yes, especially when I was new to China, that happened to me many times). He must have seen that I couldn't follow him at all, so he asked me if I had any plans for the weekend and if I would like to play badminton with him. I came across this sort of kindness a lot during my time at Tsinghua, with these kind of memories possibly being the most precious ones I have from my time at Tsinghua. That student and I actually kept playing for the whole semester at least once a week, and he even took the time to teach me. Sports was one of the areas where the wide spread competitive mindset of the Chinese became very obvious. They almost never played just for fun, they were either seriously practicing or playing matches. It was almost as if they needed this seriousness to really enjoy it.

A similar phenomenon could be observed in almost any organized club. No matter what club you wanted to join, sports team, debating club or the international students organizations, there was with almost no exception always a tryout or an interview. I tried out for the mathematics faculty's table tennis team and even though I didn't make it into the team I was invited to join the team practice, which doesn't sound like much, but considering that table tennis is quite popular in China and the other people there played super well, I was quite happy and proud for getting the chance to practice with them.

Both badminton and table tennis can be played at the 气膜体育馆 which is marked with a B on the map. You might already guess from the name that it is not a solid building, but only an air filled membrane, similar to a bouncy castle. It's very close to the dorms, so if you want to be active in the morning, you can play there from 6 am, and in the evening you can use the courts and tables until 10 pm.

There are also some places on campus where students can play the piano. The place with the best pianos is the student's cultural activity center which is marked with a C on the map. Be aware that you need to get an extra card

to access the music rooms, which you can get at the place marked with an F on the map. It took me ages to find this place. Along with the other tips included in this report, I hope that this one will save some of the readers some trouble as well.

It was always a pleasure to listen to the talented people in the culture center. On time a cellist from Hong Kong had booked a room right after me. I was practicing Chopin's Ballade Op.23 in G-Minor at the time and there is a beautiful version of that piece for cello and piano. He asked me, if we could perform it together. Unluckily I have no recording of it and Covid prevented us from meeting again to record it, but it still was a great experience.

Besides these activities, I tried to take part in some more social clubs. My favorite was the Korean cultural association. Since I previously practiced Taekwondo and quite enjoyed listening to Korean music I had already had some connections to Korean culture. However, the real reason why I joined that club was that I just really liked their presentation at the club fair. The club fair is an event at the beginning of each semester where all the student associations introduce themselves and recruit new members. Their club offered a lot of activities. For example a quiz afternoon, a tag game, which apparently comes from a popular Korean game show, and for the anniversary of the Korean writing system they offered a crash course for the Korean characters. I learned my (Chinese) Name (蓝正龙) in Korean, which is 란정룡 (Lan Jeonglung). After the activities we always had Korean food for dinner: Korean BBQ, Korean Chicken, Shaved Ice and much more. In 五道口 (wǔdàokǒu), the area next to the east side of the campus, there are a lot of Korean restaurants. All the people in the association were super nice and it was always a lot of fun, I'm really glad I joined that club.

It surprised me, how many Korean students are studying in Beijing, especially at Tsinghua, but since Korea is quite close to Beijing and it's generally much easier for foreign students to get into the top universities in Asia compared



Fig. 4: Tsinghua Chinese-Korean association autumn term 2019

to the local ones, it makes sense that many students with good language skills, such as students from Malaysia, Singapore and Korea take the chance to study at Tsinghua, one of the top universities in Asia.

Surprisingly, the largest group of foreign students at Tsinghua were Pakistani students. Previously, I wasn't aware of the strong relationship between Pakistan and China. For anyone interested in this topic, [this¹⁴](#) might be a good place to start reading. The second largest group are the Korean students. The German group is also quite large and holds the third place among foreign students. That's mainly due to the fact that every semester there are 70 students who come from Aachen pursuing a double degree. These students also started the Chinese-German Society. They organize a get-together every other week where you sit down to drink some beer, chat and maybe play some cards; it makes you almost feel like you were back in Germany, in case you ever get homesick.

¹⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China%E2%80%93Pakistan_relations#:~:text=Pakistan%20has%20a%20long%20and,centre%2Dpoint%20of%20bilateral%20ties.,
last accessed: 10.01.2021.

You may already have realized that the campus is quite international, which is also the way Tsinghua wants to present itself. The campus itself is built in a rather western fashion and reminds of college campuses in the US. Nevertheless, Tsinghua has always been the more ‘patriotic’ one of the two big universities, Tsinghua and Peking University (Běijīng dàxué, in short 北大 - běidà), meaning more loyal to the government. The cultural revolution started in Tsinghua, whereas Beida was a driving force of the ’89 Democracy Movement. Many of my friends there were party members, so it was quite interesting to discuss our views. But it was rather unsettling to hear about some professors apparently getting removed from their positions due to complaints from students about their statements against the Party.

Aside from the clubs and activities, the most popular time to hang out with friends outside of class was for the meals. I often made plans with some friends to meet up for breakfast, so that I would actually get up in the morning, even if I had no class. And already the breakfast for me was a real event. The Chinese food and eating habits differ quite a lot from what I knew from Germany. My typical breakfast would usually be something like this:

包子 (bāozi, filled buns), 油条 (yóutíao, oily strips) and 豆浆 (dòujiāng, soy milk). You can see a typical breakfast in Fig. ???. It’s a quite common Chinese breakfast, another very common food is 粥 (zhōu, rice porridge). The dishes you could choose for breakfast were not the same as the ones for lunch and dinner, but were quite similar in each of the 17 canteens.

During lunch and dinner time, my favorite places to go were 紫荆园 (Zijing Yuan) marked with a D on the map above and 清芬园 (Qingfen Yuan) marked with an E. I can especially recommend the 3rd (or 4th in Chinese counting) floor in Zijing where you can find food from Sichuan and Hunan, which is best known for being very spicy. My favorite dish in Qingfen was 麻辣香锅 (málàxiānggōo). For that dish you can choose the ingredients yourself and



Fig. 5: A typical breakfast

it will be prepared right there (actually all food is prepared right in front of your eyes, but for most other dishes you can't choose yourself).

I have to confess, during my time at Tsinghua I developed quite a severe addiction to bubble tea. After I had my first one, it didn't take long until I got one every day after lunch and sometimes even a second one after finishing my class in the evening. The bubble tea shop of my choice was situated right behind the Qingfen canteen. The place is marked with an A on the map (you probably have to zoom in a bit to find it). The shop is called 七港九 (qīgǎngjiǔ). What was really cool about the shop (and is actually a quite common feature in many Chinese restaurants) was that you could scan a QR code to make your order and pay. After a while most people figure out that you can just take a photo of the QR code and always just order 15 minutes before you arrive at the store, to avoid waiting time. It's super convenient



Fig. 6: Sichuan food in Zijing Yuan



Fig. 7: Malaxiangguo in Qingfen Yuan

and just like that, the last obstacle that would have maybe saved me from falling for bubbly tea, was gone, and there was no way back for me. (Actually there was, since I've been back in Germany I had bubble tea about two times since it's so expensive. It costs around 5€ per cup here, compared to 1.20€



(a) My favorite Bubble Tea shop on campus



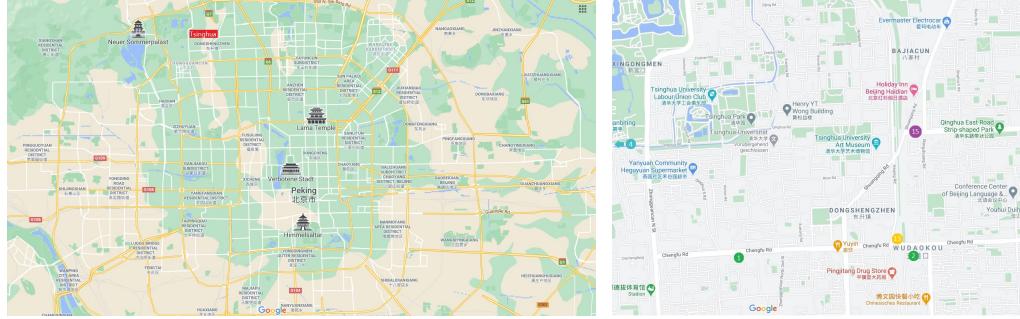
(b) My beloved Bubble Tea

for the bubble tea on campus).

Finally I want to mention a very important place, I went to almost every week: The place the packages for the students arrive. The delivery companies are not allowed to enter the campus, so all packages are delivered to a central place at the north side of the campus marked with an 8 on the map in Fig. ???. When you order something online you will be asked for your phone number and when the package arrived you will be informed by SMS. That SMS also contains the exact place you need to go to and a code you need to show in order to get your package.

4 Life in China

During the time I spent in Beijing, there was always a clear cut between the campus and the world outside. The campus really was a bubble of some of the smartest and most privileged people you could find in China. Outside the campus, you were still in Beijing, which is among the richest and most important cities in China, so to think that the people you meet there live the average Chinese life, is far from the truth. Just as Tsinghua is a bubble of



(a) Map of Beijing

(b) Map of Wudaokou

academia inside Beijing, Beijing is a bubble of wealth in the heart of China. Consequently, the experiences I had on campus, in Beijing and outside Beijing were all very different. The most obvious one in the beginning was that on campus you could get around with English with no troubles at all. That was not so true outside of campus. I remember when I tried to get a SIM card for my phone, none of the employees in the shop even tried to help me in English, instead they tried to somehow figure out what my, at time quite flawed, Chinese jabbering could mean. I eventually managed to get a SIM card. Still I always felt a bit nervous when I had to order or handle something in Chinese. After getting more confident in my Chinese ability I managed to mostly avoid using English when I was outside of Campus. I can confidently say that I probably learned more Chinese from using it in everyday life than in class.

4.1 Life in Beijing

Beijing, in my opinion, is a very unique city. A mix of modern and historical, of politics and business. Even if it is in the eye of the beholder, I never felt that Beijing was a beautiful city. Beijing kind of looks the same wherever you go, the straight and wide ring roads, the giant apartment buildings that look like they have already had their best days behind them,

the brand new shiny shopping malls. Still you will find that under the surface every place is unique. You often fluctuate between the feeling of living in a giant city and seeing every district as a city on its own. The district in which I spent most of my time in 海淀区 (hǎidiànpū). Haidian is situated in the north west of Beijing and is home to 18 universities. Haidian also is becoming a major technology center. It makes Haidian a quite young and modern district.

So how does the young Chinese generation spend its time? If I had to name the top 3 they would be:

1. On the phone
2. Working/Studying
3. Traveling/美食 (měishì, Beautiful Food)

That might be a bit unfair and generalized, but I'm sure there is some truth in it for a large portion of this generation. Especially traveling is kind of a national sport. But if you can't travel and want to go out in Beijing, what is popular among young Chinese? If you have arrived at this point in the report you have probably realized that food holds a lot more significance in every day life in China compared to that in Germany. This, together with the much higher population, leads to more restaurants than you could ever visit. I really tried my best and checked out many of the places around campus. One of my favorites has been 柳叶刀烧烤 which is marked with a 1 on ?? and picture ?? was taken during my first visit there. The restaurant was opened by medical students from Peking University and has a strong emphasis on healthy food. The restaurant also had a very cool discount campaign. Your discount would depend on your best rated academic paper. The nice man who showed me the restaurant was my buddy I got assigned to from the buddy program Tsinghua offers, and I couldn't have been luckier.

He showed me all the best places to go out, in- and outside of campus, helped me when I had any administrational trouble, and we just connected very well in general. He had also spent one semester in Aachen, so he even knew some very basic German.



Fig. 10: Me and my Buddy in a BBQ restaurant near Tsinghua

I have already mentioned that I fell in love with bubble tea and you could get really fancy and delicious bubble tea outside of campus. Your standard bubble tea is just tea, milk (powder), and tapioca balls, but there are countless variants. You can have other toppings, like jelly, cubes made from coconut milk, or cream. and a variety of different teas. It's super fun to try out all the different flavors. My favorite bubble tea store was 乐乐茶 (Lele Cha) on the ground floor of the U-center, the largest shopping center in Wudaokou marked with a 2 on map ???. For me, as a countryside child, many things in

Beijing were new and fascinating just because of the big city feeling. So in some people's eyes I might seem overly excited about many things in Beijing such as having countless giant shopping malls at nearly every corner or the amazing subway connection all around campus (the 3 Lines 4, 13, 15 are marked on the map ?? as well) so you can reach every place in the central Beijing area within 1 hour at most.

But where to go using the awesome subway network? You can find the places of interest in every tourist guide so I have just included some photos here that I think are worth showing. All these places are really worth visiting. There's just not much for me to say about them. So here's a little selection of places in Beijing I really enjoyed visiting.



Fig. 11: Temple of Heaven/天坛

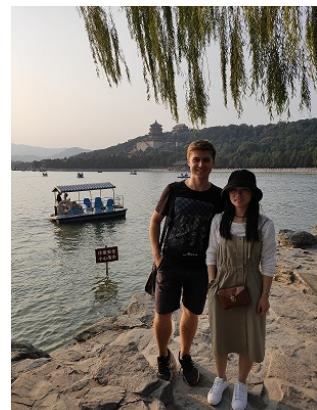
I'll briefly talk about my first visit to the new Summer Palace. I visited it during the Golden Week, the first week of October when the national holiday to celebrate the founding of the People's Republic of China takes place. You might notice that in the image ?? the park is quite crowded. In



Fig. 12: Olympic Park



(a) New Summer Palace/颐和园



(b) Me with my Buddy at the new Summer Palace

China holidays are quite rare. Compared to Germany, people in China have less days off and so the two big holidays, the national holiday and Chinese New Year, are for most Chinese a large part of their annual holidays. And as I've mentioned above, Chinese people love to travel. So you can imagine, when all Chinese are on holiday at the same time, what it means for the

traveling volume all over China. As I was warned before hand that traveling during Golden Week is especially tedious, I decided to stay in Beijing and explore the sights in the city. Beijing was very crowded itself, but since presumably more people leave Beijing for Golden Week than come to visit, it was definitely not the worst time to explore the city. Moreover, from October 1st to October 3rd the entry to all major parks in Beijing is free, just as a little bonus. During that time, since all students were free as well, I had the chance to meet some friends whom were visiting Beijing at the time or attended other Universities in Beijing. For example I visited the New Summer Palace together with my friend, who I took care of in a Buddy program during her exchange in Heidelberg, as seen in image ??.



Fig. 14: Old Summer Palace/圆明园

The fact that there are so many people in China, will not only occur to you during Golden Week, but all the time, and it was one of the most striking, yet subtle differences I experienced in China. Just for illustration the most densely populated district of Berlin is Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg with a population density of around 14000 citizens per square kilometer¹⁵, which is a lot less than the two districts in the center of Beijing, 西城 (xīchéng; approx. 23000 citizens per square kilometer) and 东城 (dōngchéng; approx. 20000 citizens per square kilometer). Considering that Beijing is not really densely populated by Chinese standards, you can maybe imagine how full big cities in China feel. I got used to it slowly. Although I enjoyed the experience, I think in the long run it would be a very exhausting experience with that many people constantly around you, so many impressions and so many things screaming for your attention. I assume after a while you would get numb to it and simply ignore most things around you, just focusing on your business.

I had the feeling that it was also a common attitude among Chinese. They would be very welcoming in their circle, but many didn't care much about things outside their own cosmos. This concept of us and them is rooted deeply in Chinese culture. The Chinese word for it is 关系 (guānxi), „relations“ in English. These guanxi are very important in the structure of Chinese society and business. You can think of it kind of like an extension of family structures. With the right guanxi, you can basically get anything, but of course you also have to give what's possible for you. The most important tool to maintain these guanxi is, after everything I already mentioned, going out for dinner.

¹⁵<https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin>, last accessed: 10.01.2021.

4.2 My travel experiences

One of my few regrets that I had for my exchange was that I didn't visit more places in China. My original plan was to focus on the university life in my first semester, especially improve my Chinese to a conversational level and do the majority of traveling during my winter break and in spring. Unluckily everything turned out differently.

In late August, after I had just arrived in China and before the semester started, I went on my first travel to Shanghai. The high speed train network (高铁, gāo tiě) is probably the most impressive railroad I have ever seen in my life. The fastest trains cover the distance from Beijing to Shanghai in 4.5 hours. Just as the trains, the stations were also astonishing. They reminded me more of airports than of train stations. When going to Shanghai I started at Beijing South Station. With the metro line 4 you directly arrive under it and directly get to the public area of the station.

Buying tickets in China is a two step process. You can reserve and pay the tickets online, but have to go to the counter in the train station and show your passport. Only then they will hand you your ticket. For Chinese citizens there is a machine for that, but as a foreigner you have no choice but to queue up at the counter. This complicated process of obtaining a ticket is just one of many safety measures you encounter when taking public transport. Even at every subway station there is a security check at each entry. At the large train stations you already have to pass the first security check at the entrance to the public area. To get to the waiting area for the train you need a ticket and you have to go through a second, more intense security check. They will check your documents again as well and once that's done you can wait for your train. Beijing south station is a really modern station. And it's huge. There are around 26 platforms for the trains. While waiting for your train you stay in a giant hall together with thousands of other people. A few minutes before the train arrives you are allowed to enter the platform. That

happens through an extra terminal where they check your ticket again. Once on the platform you have to find the right place to wait for your car. The tickets already have place numbers and because the trains are around 200m long (I'm not sure if it's accurate, but to me they felt at least 200m long) it is quite important to wait at the right spot. Most of the time the trains were on time (only one of my trains had a delay when I went from Suzhou to Beijing and I was so grateful, since otherwise I would have missed that train). Once you are on the train it was pretty much a normal train ride. I never took one of the roads that is said to be especially beautiful (one connection of this kind would be 昆明/Kunming to 成都/Chengdu which I already had booked for early February, but Covid got in the way). The older, slower (and also cheaper) trains are more of an adventure. When you spend 14 hours on the ride from Beijing to Shanghai in a not very comfortable seat between all the different people, hear all the different dialects, you always become aware of how big China actually is. But the old trains gradually gets replaced by the new high-speed trains. With the new train connections and the easy access to domestic flights China doesn't really feel that big sometimes. From Beijing you can get almost anywhere in under 10 hours so China doesn't feel as big as it actually is. The distance from Beijing to Guilin is approximately 1700 km (for comparison the distance between Berlin and Moscow is only 1600 km) and still it feels kind of close with how fast and uncomplicated you get there.

As soon as you get out of Beijing you really remember that you are a foreigner. The funniest experience in this regard happened to me when I was traveling to Guangxi in south China with my parents who came to visit me during the semester break. We took a DiDi to a national park in 阳朔 (yángshùo). Since we ordered the car from the app, I initially didn't talk to the driver except a short greeting. So he assume that none of us would understand any Chinese. During the drive he suddenly started a video call. He talked for about one

minute and then said something like „Look, I have three foreigners in the car“. He tried to hide his phone while showing us on camera. My parents didn't notice, but me, sitting next to him in the front of the car, had no way to miss it. After a while I asked him in Chinese how long the ride would take and he looked very surprised at me for a few seconds. He obviously didn't expect me to understand him, but after the first shock he got super excited. He started to talk to me non-stop about China's greatness, how much he appreciates foreigners learning the language, about China being the safest place in the world, how the government maintains peace in contrast to other countries (I think he was referring to Syria) which are constantly at war. In general chatting with taxi drivers was really fun. They talked about everything and anything. When I told them that I'm from Germany, they got really excited most of the time and started to talk about German cars. About how bad the Chinese men's national football team is. Their favorite dishes. Donald Trump. Really just anything.

My travel destinations in China included: Shanghai, the famous business center of China; Suzhou, which is home to the most beautiful Chinese gardens; the world famous karst landscape around Guilin; the famous ice world in Harbin. I also visited Tokyo and Kyoto in Japan. Just as before I don't want to go into depth about the places I visited, since you can find all the information in other places. I will just share some of my favorite photos I took during my travels.

The sightseeing aspect of my travels was very fascinating, but what was even more interesting to me were the impressions I got. It were the small things that made it unique. Things you can't show on a photo. For me the traveling adventure began upon leaving the main tourist roads. Walking through a food market, walking around an average neighborhood where nobody cares about whipping the place into shape for the tourists. Watching a cook making noodles from scratch. People playing Chinese chess in the park or in front



Fig. 15: The karst mountains along the Li river

of their houses. I could go on forever, but I think I wouldn't really be able describe how I feel about all these things.

I want to delve deeper into one thing I witnessed in China, as well as in Japan, and in my opinion shapes the life of many people in these countries: the struggle to combine a modern lifestyle while keeping old traditions. China has been evolving quickly over the last few decades and it's difficult for people to keep up with this rate of change. This is certainly not a phenomena that's unique to China. In almost all cultures and in each era the older generation struggles to understand the culture of the younger generation, but the fast rate of change and the complicated relationship between the Chinese people to their history, culture and traditions amplifies this effect by a lot. When they grow older, the goal for most Chinese is to obtain stability and security. For most, this means financial security or simply, earning a lot of money.



Fig. 16: Rice terraces in Guangxi



Fig. 17: The ice city in Harbin

But if you look more closely, this might be about to change. 30 years ago only around 3% of high school graduates enrolled in a colleges or universities, but by 2019 they reached an enrollment rate of over 53%. So the new generation



Fig. 18: The Skyline of Shanghai



Fig. 19:
Akihabara
district in Tokyo



Fig. 20:
Shirakawago - A
traditional Japanese village in
the mountains



Fig. 21:
Fushimi
Inari-Taisha in
Kyoto

of parents are far more educated and thus might have a much higher standard of living.

This emerging generation of highly educated parents in an environment that is gradually retracting the one-child policy might result in the pressuring of



Fig. 22: From left to right: an antique shop in Harbin, a food market in Guilin and a side street in downtown Shanghai.

children becoming less common.

The focused pressure an only child previously received might have been motivated by the parents hope for them to have a better life than themselves and seeing their child as their only chance in bringing success to the family. During my travel to Harbin I had a long conversation with a mother who was traveling with her daughter. The mother was working as a Chinese teacher and from my impression she didn't pressure her daughter a lot. She told me that, to her, her daughter's happiness is much more important than her career. The girl was around 12, so it's not clear as to what she will do in the future, but her mother thought that she might decide to pursue a career in music, since it is her favorite hobby and she's very passionate about it.

5 My experience with the Covid-19 Pandemic

5.1 Early phase of the Pandemic

After the first semester, while I was traveling in Guangxi together with my parents, Covid-19 began to get serious in Wuhan. I had heard some news in the German media early in January, but when we traveled to Guilin on January 20th, according to reports in the Chinese media, the Covid situation

wasn't very severe outside of Wuhan. However on January 23rd, the lockdown in Wuhan was officially announced followed by lockdowns for more cities in Hubei on January 25th. On January 23rd we were traveling to the rice terraces of Longji near Guilin and spent a night in a hotel in a small village by the terraces. You can see the terraces and the village on the image in Fig. 16. Since the village was very remote we didn't really notice what was going on in Wuhan, but when we returned to Guilin on January 24th, something had changed. Everyone was wearing masks, many shops were closed (probably also due to the upcoming Chinese New Year festival on January 25th) and people seemed to be worried. Similar to what we experienced later that year in Germany, it was really hard to get masks when people started to get afraid of Covid. When we heard of the new lockdowns on January 25th, we decided to return to Beijing and from there go back to Germany. At the time, we were not so much afraid of the virus of that time, but rather that the lockdown would be extended and that we would have trouble returning to Germany.

Back in Beijing the city seemed to be deserted. The streets were empty, no cars, no people, nothing. This was partly due to Chinese new year, since many people were leaving Beijing to go home to their families, but certainly also due to Covid. At that time the hotels we had already booked informed us that they would temporarily close and apologized for not being able to host us. Almost no restaurants were open. It really gave all of us a strange feeling. We got a flight back to Germany on January 28th, which was so far the last day I spent in China. Luckily the workers at my dorm at Tsinghua still allowed me to enter my room for 30 minutes to get the most important of my belongings so I could bring them back to Germany, even if they were officially not allowed to do so. Already at the gates of the campus you could feel that they checked who goes in much more strictly than before. I think a few days later the Campus of Tsinghua was completely locked down and

stayed this way until June. In June, PhD student's were allowed to re-enter the campus and one of my friends packed my belongings that were still in my room and sent them back to me.

I personally wouldn't have returned to Germany so soon if my parents hadn't been in China at the time. At the time I also didn't think that it would be the end of my time in China. I assumed that I would be able to return to Tsinghua in March or early April, since that was roughly the time it took to get the 2002 SARS pandemic back under control. One year later I can say that I was very wrong with this assumption.

5.2 Online courses

Even if I could not be present, I still continued my studies at Tsinghua the following semester. By now all students in Germany are familiar with online teaching, but it was interesting to see how the universities in China gradually learned how to set up an effective online teaching program. I previously gave a talk on the topic at the Konfuzius-Institute Heidelberg¹⁶. The online courses were definitely less enjoyable than actually being in class. When it was clear that I probably wouldn't be able to return to Tsinghua I decided to also take courses in Heidelberg so I still could use my time effectively. The most trouble I had was definitely with the Chinese language course. Since I didn't live in an environment, in which I had to use Chinese to some degree every day anymore, I struggled a lot with this course and also didn't finish it, since without the practice I got from my daily life in China it was just too hard for me. The fact that the course started at 6 am wasn't helpful either. Another issue was that I didn't feel that teaching a language online in a group worked very well.

¹⁶https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JD_HbWV5y1bI5Al72uMcd6pTDL2mL0Sh/view?usp=sharing, last accessed: 10.01.2021.

On the other hand for subjects like mathematics it worked very well. I enjoyed the format of my rigid cohomology lecture a lot. The professor uploaded the lecture in two videos every week, so that he could hold a discussion session during the lecture time where he would answer questions and give us examples or problems for us to solve. The final exam was in form of a report that should be at least 20 pages long. For me that was a nearly optimal way to organize this kind of course online. And it's very similar to what my courses in Germany now look like.

I assume that in the future these kind of hybrid models where lectures are distributed in form of videos with extra discussion sessions or seminars in class will gain more and more popularity.

6 Looking Back

Going to China might have been the best experience of my life and even though my time there have been cut short by a pandemic the experiences I made will stay with me for the rest of my life. I have seen so many things, met so many people and learned so much during this time, that it feels like I spent many years there.

It took me some time to appreciate how lucky I am to be able making the experiences I made. Especially when the pandemic came to Germany, when it was clear that my time at Tsinghua ended so abruptly and much earlier than expected, I often wondered why it happened to me, but with some distance now, I'm grateful for what I had and don't regret what I've missed. Because of the mixed feelings I had when looking back, I had a really hard time writing this report and it ended up taking me much longer than it should have.

I can say that Beijing became like a second home to me. I especially realized that when I returned to Beijing, from Japan, in early January 2020, and

it really felt like going home, which is why it was all the more sad that I didn't get to have a proper farewell, but looking forward I'm determined to go back. Most of the things I still have left on my bucket list are places I want to visit. As it's unlikely that I will enroll in a Chinese university again, I feel like I definitely made the most of my Tsinghua experience, and since I will probably get more chances to travel in China there's nothing lost, just postponed. For now, I'm moving on, and looking forward I think that China will play a role in my future.

