

## Contrast, Complexity & Connection – My Semester in China

中国 China – one of the most mesmerizing countries. A nation that not only in ancient times but also today, stands as a testament to relentless innovation. The vibrant modern landscape, characterized by its status as a global innovation hub, is mirrored in the many exhibitions and business' which showcase the nation's commitment to pushing the boundaries of what is possible. In this essay I will share with you my journey as a master student to the capital of this beautiful and magical country. Please note that this is my personal opinion and experience.



### Preparation, Enrollment & First Weeks

Let's start a few thousand kilometers away from Beijing – in Hamburg. When enrolling at BSP, I already knew I wanted to study at BFSU, as it had long been my goal to finally study and live in my favorite destination. Since the two schools have a partnership agreement, the process was somewhat smoother than if I had chosen a *freemover program*. Additionally, the support from the international office was very reassuring throughout both the enrollment process and my stay abroad. However, if you are familiar with Chinese bureaucracy, you know that such processes can be rather opaque.

Submitting all required documents and receiving the invitation letter takes time, so flexibility is essential. The university only prepares these documents once all applications have been received. To apply for a visa, you need an official invitation letter from the Chinese university. After that, the visa process is straightforward and relatively easy. There are Chinese Visa Centers across Germany, including in Hamburg. Simply fill out the required documents online, book an appointment, and you will typically receive your visa within a week. However, be aware that obtaining the visa does not yet guarantee your place at the university. Your student status will only be officially confirmed after payment and in-person enrollment in Beijing, as I will explain later.

As a master's student, you must first consult your *Studiengangleiter* to determine whether the courses offered by IBS can be accepted as substitutes for your classes at BSP. This is crucial because the grades you receive in China will be included in your final transcript of records. The same courses are typically offered every year, but the selection is relatively small, and the credit points are rather low. This means you may need to take

two courses in China to substitute for one BSP course. Additionally, only master's-level courses are eligible for substitution. Once this is sorted, you are all set to pack your bags!

Traveling to a country that implements restrictions on certain mobile applications – especially if you don't speak the language – requires careful preparation. If you haven't lived in or traveled to China before, make sure to download all the necessary apps in advance (as of 2024: Didi, Alipay, WeChat, Amap, a VPN, and a translator app). Set them up beforehand. Most importantly, ensure that you can make payments via WeChat and Alipay and prepare at least two different payment methods to cover the larger study fees.

Enrollment takes place over three designated days on campus. Be well-rested beforehand, as you may not be able to complete your enrollment on the first or even the second day, despite arriving early in the morning. This lengthy process – where every staff member speaks only Chinese – can be frustrating. Every student, whether full-time or exchange, must pass through 12 different stations, each managed by a single worker. This procedure repeats every semester for all international students, making for an inevitably chaotic situation. You will also need to pay for mandatory insurance – make sure to bring cash for this. To be honest, this type of organizational chaos is standard in Chinese universities; it's simply how things are done.

During the first week, you will have the opportunity to participate in various welcome activities – be sure to sign up if you're interested! In my case, master's students started their semester two weeks later than bachelor's students. If you are aware of this in advance, consider using the time to travel! Since this wasn't communicated to me, I ended up staying in Beijing and enjoying the city on my own instead.





### **Campus @BFSU, Class Schedule & Daily Life**

Like most Chinese universities, BFSU has a large campus with on-site dormitories, giving you the opportunity to choose accommodation that fits your budget. To secure your preferred dorm room, it is essential to make a reservation on time.

The university has multiple campuses, but the main one is divided into two sections, separated by a road. One side hosts three different international dorms, the IBS classrooms, a small supermarket, and several dining options. The other side accommodates all Chinese students, along with one international dorm, classrooms, theater halls, and multiple cafeterias.

If you enjoy theater, pay close attention to posters on this side of the campus, as BFSU students regularly put on performances. Announcements are typically posted about a week in advance and are only in Chinese, so keep an eye out! It's truly impressive how

many talented students perform, and it's even more remarkable that the university provides them with a platform to showcase their abilities. As German students, we found these high-quality performances particularly special – not only because we would rarely experience such events at German universities, but also because, unlike in Germany, they were completely free of charge!

Beyond academics and culture, the campus also offers excellent sports facilities, including tennis and basketball courts, a running track, a swimming pool, and a well-equipped but often crowded gym. Some of these facilities require a fee for usage, so be prepared for that.



Once classes start your schedule will be quite packed. After the first week you will know for most classes what kind of assignments you will have to undertake and how many. There is not only a single exam at the end but often a mid-term exam and a final exam while some teachers will count and grade your engagement during the class. For most classes you will also have to work on presentations and hand in tasks or short essays every week. Since the classes are very international you will work together with many people from different cultural backgrounds. At the same time this is very time consuming and sometimes nerve racking but a very good opportunity to understand how to work together as an international group and what communication means... Due to the comparably high work load free time is somewhat limited. Keeping a good overview of tasks and assignment due dates is crucial as the semester is rather short with aprox. 4.5 months. Otherwise, the preparation for the exam will be very stressful – as I experienced with many long and almost sleepless study nights. A good balance to the classes and studying is the Chinese food though! Trying not only all of the restaurants around the campus and on-campus but also around the city is probably one of the best things one can do in China! To put it in simple words, Chinese food is A-MAZING and offers great variety! Don't be hesitant to try new and funky looking things. The prices are great and once you're back in western Europe you won't find such quality, variety and prices. Grab some of your newly made international friends and enjoy!

Besides food, Beijing offers many traditional cultural and modern site as well as great parks within and around the city. Make sure to visit the different sites by night and day as

they feel very different. Getting around the city is unbelievably simple with the metro and bus system or taxi (aka didi). Long-distance travel is too. But as a master student I stayed mostly in Beijing as my class-schedule didn't allow me to travel far away as it was simply not worth it for a weekend. Though I made great friends with whom I hung out whenever possible and went to karaoke, bars, events and on 'city-walks'.



Since I speak Chinese, I didn't face many challenges in daily life. However, I would argue that even without knowing the language, it is now much easier to navigate Beijing, as tourism is increasing and the government has introduced more English labels and signage in public places. Ultimately, doing some research before traveling to a foreign country is always essential to make the most of the experience.

I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to study in Beijing and enjoyed it as much as possible. When I chose this university, I knew I would have to dedicate a significant amount of time to studying. Still, I wouldn't have minded having a bit more time to travel and immerse myself even further in the culture and language. At the same time, I deeply appreciate the international office, which was always supportive whenever I had a question – I truly felt looked after. For me, China is and always has been one of the most magical places on earth – so you can call me biased.

Personally, I made many great new connections and learned a lot! I am truly happy to have met so many international people, but at the same time, I feel sad because our relationships had just started to strengthen when I already had to leave for my next

destination. Such richness and diversity among international students is probably hard to find within a single class at a university in Germany. Therefore, BFSU had not only a strong Chinese atmosphere but also an international and worldly one. Despite the hard work – or perhaps because of it—I was able to connect with wonderful people from all over the globe.



### **Ending on a personal note**

Ultimately, whether you choose to participate in a study program at BFSU should depend on your primary goal. If your focus is on cultural and language immersion, and you prioritize extensive travel, then this university may not be the best choice for your master's degree. However, if you haven't traveled to Asia before and want a glimpse into a different world from a campus perspective – and you don't mind dedicating a significant amount of time to studying and coursework – then BFSU could be the right fit for you. Whatever you decide, make sure you are clear about your goals!