

Girton College Travel Award Report

George Cowperthwaite

During the summer of 2018, I travelled to China with a group of other students from Oxford and Cambridge, to spend eight weeks teaching and exploring cities along the east coast of China. This teaching opportunity was organised by a Chinese agency, CamExpress, which invited me to Shanghai as an intern to teach A-level and entry level University mathematics to Chinese students who were aiming to apply to Oxbridge. The Girton Travel Scholarship greatly contributed to the success of my travels and enabled me to travel widely along the coast of China; something I wouldn't have been able to do without this funding.

I flew into Shanghai Pudong airport late on a Monday evening and travelled to an English language school on the outskirts of Shanghai, which was where I was to be based for the first four weeks in China. The next day, I woke at 9am to meet the other Oxbridge interns and begin our week of orientation training, to help us acclimatise and develop our teaching skills in preparation for the weeks ahead. I had almost zero prior experience of classroom teaching and yet in only a few days I was to



ULink campus – the first school I worked in

be put in charge of a class of 26 Chinese A-level students, so it was a daunting prospect to say the least! The other interns were in a similar position; we were almost all undergraduates from a variety of STEM subjects, including biology, chemistry, engineering, economics and maths. Most of us had never been to mainland China before, so as well as our orientation, we were keen to get out and spend our first few evenings exploring Shanghai.

The first place we visited was the old town in Songjiang district, a series of winding alleyways filled with traditionally designed Chinese stalls and restaurants. The next evening, we travelled to the city centre for my first experience of Chinese fine dining, eating at a Peking Duck restaurant. Afterwards we took a ferry across the river to the Shanghai financial district, where



Shanghai City skyline (Pudong district)

some of the most impressive skyscrapers were located, before heading home on the Metro. The Metro was very impressive – a cheap, modernised version of the London Underground which you could use to get anywhere in the city for 5¥ (50p) at most. The only downside was that it rather inconveniently closed at 10:30pm every day, leading to many occasions where we would sprint through the city, desperately looking for the nearest station before the

last train left.



Zhujiajiao water town

Some of the other places we visited that week included the Zhujiajiao water town, a settlement on the edge of Shanghai famous for its waterways and Buddhist temples, and the Shanghai propaganda museum, which features a selection of communist propaganda posters from the mid to late 20th Century. We also took time to experience the city's nightlife, including Karaoke, clubbing and street food. Chinese karaoke, known as KTV, was very popular in Shanghai and there were many places to hire a private room for an evening of (unfailing poor) karaoke singing. This quickly became our favourite activity and we would end up booking a late-night session nearly every week, often despite the fact we were teaching at 9am the next morning!



Enjoying a KTV session

After the first week concluded, it was time to start teaching. My first role was as a general maths teacher, providing a refresher course in calculus and graph sketching to the maths and engineering groups. I was put in sole charge of a class of 26 students and tasked with delivering three-hour lessons every morning, followed by personal statement consultation sessions in the afternoons. I suddenly became very busy with preparing classwork, homework, tests, solutions and teaching material for all my lessons – most of my second week was devoted to this work. Although I was nervous at first, I quickly acclimatised and became more confident as the week progressed – I especially felt that my ability to improvise and communicate with the class improved as the days went by. I rather enjoyed reading the students' test results every day and seeing how well they'd understood my teaching, especially when I introduced completely new or challenging topics. One of the quirks of the program was that students would provide feedback on the teachers every day, just to keep us on our toes, so I did feel under pressure at times; thankfully my feedback was usually good!



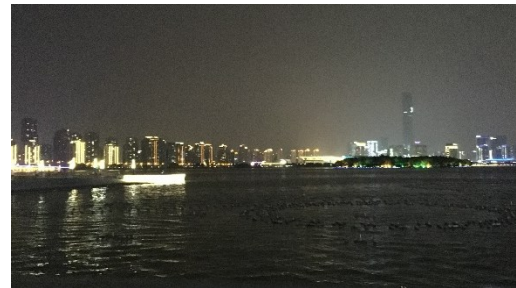
Students, interns and staff at ULink campus

good!

Due to the teaching preparation taking up most of our time in the second week, we would usually eat locally or order takeaways, giving us the opportunity to sample a variety of Chinese cuisine. Late evenings would often be spent playing cards and drinking baiju, while comparing our first experiences of teaching (and complaining about particularly lazy students).

For the third and fourth weeks, I was put in joint charge of a smaller subject maths class, alongside a recent Oxford maths graduate. These lessons were focused on more advanced topics, such as number theory and combinatorics, such that students would be able to expand their knowledge beyond the confines of A-level. I had freedom to design the curriculum and was able to share some of my favourite topics with the class, much in the (somewhat naive) hope that they'd want to come to Cambridge to study these areas in further depth. I was also put in charge of running afternoon workshops, focussed on improving students' performance in MAT and STEP, and arranging college consultation sessions (where I would tactfully highlight the advantages of Girton), bringing my daily contact hours up to six. Again, there was not much time for exploring during the weekdays, so we decided to end the week with a trip away in the nearby city of Suzhou.

We stayed for two days in Suzhou, the first of which we spent exploring the older part of the city. Much like the old town in Shanghai, although with subtle architectural differences, it contained a variety of traditional stalls, ornate monuments and secluded temples. The next day we tried Chinese hotpot, a popular style of cooking where a variety of meats, vegetables and mushrooms are boiled together in a spicy soup.



View of Suzhou across Jinji lake

After the weekend, we travelled back to Shanghai and moved to a new school nearer to the city centre, where we were to repeat the teaching program again with a new group of students. This school was considerably more spartan and the class sizes increased, although by now we were accustomed to our teaching duties, so we took it in our stride.



Boat on Hangzhou west lake

During the weekend of the fifth week, we went on another weekend trip to a city called Hangzhou. This city is famous for its west lake, surrounded by rolling green hills and ancient pagodas, so we took a ferry across the lake to explore the islands in the centre. Whilst in Hangzhou, we also visited the main shopping district and watched a light show on the lake, before wandering through the night market near our hotel.

After the seventh week concluded and the teaching program had ended, I set off on a much-anticipated journey to the city that proved to be the highlight of the trip: Beijing. Along with a small group of interns, I travelled 1300km north from Shanghai on a bullet train, late on a Friday evening. We eventually arrived at our accommodation, a small run-down apartment on the city outskirts, before setting out the next day to the Forbidden City, a centuries old terracotta complex in the centre of the city. Strict planning permission prevented most construction in the area surrounding



The Forbidden City

the City, so it seemed as if we had been transported to a serene countryside setting when we entered. After exploring the vast maze of courtyards and museums in the City, we left to travel to nearby Tiananmen Square, where some of the main government buildings were located alongside Mao Zedong's mausoleum. The day was completed with a trek across the city centre to an older district, where we visited a traditional Chinese tea room and sampled a variety of local brews.



View from the Great Wall

The next day we woke early and boarded a minibus to take us on a trip to the Mutianyu section of the Great Wall of China, a huge fortification built historically to guard against barbarian invasion from northern Mongolia. We took a cable car up into the mountains to the first guardhouse, before trekking for two hours along the wall section to survey the breathtaking scenery from the highest point on the wall, passing through sixteen Ming dynasty watchtowers on the way.

I spent my final day in Beijing visiting Tsinghua University campus, one of China's most prestigious universities, before taking a train back to Shanghai. It wasn't long before I set off again on the way to my final destination: The Shaolin Temple, the place that is regarded to be the birthplace of Kung Fu. To reach it I had to travel far inland



Entrance to Tsinghua University



Courtyard in the Shaolin Temple returning to the base via a scenic cable car route.

The next day I travelled back to Shanghai to catch a plane to Hong Kong, where I spent the next week visiting friends before heading back to the UK in early September. I look back on my eight weeks spent in China as some of the best moments in my life, both because of the places I visited and the friends I made while I was there. I am incredibly grateful to have received the Girton Travel Scholarship, as it enabled me to experience China



View from Mt. Song cable car

in a way I would never have imagined before I came. I look forward to many more adventures there in the future!