



EXCHANGE REPORT

Name

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Year and semester for
exchange

Fall 2024

Exchange university

Tongji University

Degree programme

Master in Architecture

Immersed in the Unfamiliar: An Exchange Adventure at Tongji University

Before departure

I applied for exchange studies to embark on an adventure and challenge myself by radically changing my environment. I chose China because of its fascinating culture and rich history. It's also relatively closed off, and I felt that full immersion was the only way to truly understand it. Additionally, the country's massive urbanization and rapid development over the past few decades intrigued me, showcasing architectural experimentation and radically different modes of space production that have driven deep societal transformations.

To prepare, I taught myself some Mandarin, which proved invaluable, especially when exploring rural provinces. Securing a student visa is straightforward, but a critical part of preparation is setting up essential apps for life in China. These include payment apps (since nearly everything is paid for via mobile), Chinese maps, and WeChat for communication and services (note: your account must be verified by another user, likely a Chinese one). Most importantly, invest in a reliable paid VPN, as the Chinese Firewall blocks many Western apps like Google, Facebook, and Instagram. While free VPNs can serve as backups, a good VPN is indispensable. Having these apps ready before arrival makes settling in much easier.

Upon arrival

I arrived a few days before the semester began, which gave me just enough time to adjust to the daily routine—quite different from the Western lifestyle. Unfortunately, there wasn't much of an introduction for international students—no buddy program or welcoming events. The international office provided a brief presentation and a campus tour, but most of the acclimatization was up to me.

While integrating with other international students was easy, connecting with Chinese students proved challenging, as many are not fluent or confident in speaking English. That said, they are often curious about foreign students and eager to practice English, which presents an excellent opportunity for cultural exchange.

Tongji has strong ties with European universities, especially in Germany and Italy. Students from Berlin, Venice, or Padova often have more insights into navigating Tongji, as these schools send large groups of students annually.

Financials

I didn't receive a scholarship from KTH but was awarded one from the China Scholarship Council. This included free on-campus accommodation, insurance, and a stipend for daily expenses. In my experience, most international students who applied for this scholarship received it.

China is generally affordable, with living costs significantly lower than in Sweden, even in Shanghai, one of the country's most expensive cities. The monthly scholarship (3000 yuan) covered essentials like food and commuting, but I funded additional travel and leisure activities myself.

There weren't any significant additional fees after my arrival, thanks to the scholarship covering most formalities. However, for students staying a full year, the process is more complex, requiring a different visa, a residence permit, health checks, and additional steps. It's worth noting that a half-year visa allows only single entry, so international travel during the semester isn't possible.

Accommodation

The scholarship provided free on-campus accommodation. I stayed in a double room with a private bathroom. While the dorm was a bit run-down and not the cleanest, its central location on campus, just minutes from faculty buildings and canteens, made it convenient. The dorm office also handled all the formalities for me.

For those not living on campus, finding accommodation independently can be challenging, especially before arriving in China. The international office provided options for private dorms outside the campus, which are much more expensive but comfortable. Many students opted for shared apartments or studios, though arranging these can be complicated, especially if you don't have friends there yet.

University and studies

Tongji University is a big school, with five campuses and numerous subject areas of studying. It is best known for its architecture and urban planning programs.

As an exchange student you can freely arrange your curriculum with courses from graduate and undergraduate level. All the courses for international students are taught in English. I have stuck to courses offered by my faculty, so ones that are part of architecture, urban planning and landscape architecture programs. On top of that you have some extra courses offered by international school – those are more general, concerning Chinese culture, politics or tradition. You can also take a Chinese language course there.

Studies differ from KTH quite significantly. First thing is a number of courses – in order to get full number of credits (30 ECTS corresponding to 15 Tongji credits) I needed to take 6 courses and a design studio. Workload varies for different courses, and it does not necessarily is reflected in the number of credits. The most time you would spend on the design studio, but the overall requirements are lower than in KTH. Then for all other courses it is mostly lectures and student presentations. As a rule, the courses at Tongji are a bit more technical and little less advanced than in KTH, at least to my experience.

Courses

Rural Revitalization: It was one of the most interesting courses during my studies at Tongji and one of very few where you can learn something about China. A design studio focused on Chinese rural areas, led by Harry den Hartog. The studio wasn't very well structured, but it consisted of couple of site visits where we could make our documentation, observe the local life and the landscape, talk with locals (some students knew mandarin well enough).

Review of the Architectural and Urban Culture: A lecture series on contemporary Chinese architecture. Interesting guest speakers but not very engaging overall.

Comparative Studies on Chinese and German Architecture: Lectures and student presentations, featuring many guest speakers (mostly German). It was more like a series of independent topics rather than a coherent course on a specific subject. Included a study trip.

Cultural Heritage Conservation and Sustainability: Landscape architecture course organized as a series of lectures. Quite formal and academic with not so much of thinking. Some guests speakers were invited; there was also a subseries of lectures on creating digital documentation of heritage landscapes (3d scanning etc.).

Landscape Theory: An online pre-recorded course that lacked depth and critical engagement.

The Relationship between Culture and the Plastic Arts in China: An engaging course exploring the interplay between cultural changes and artistic artifacts. The course went through most of the Chinese history, so it makes it a good way to get familiar with it. Great teacher, with a lot of enthusiasm.

Urban Housing Policy: A short but insightful urban planning course on housing policy in China. One of the few occasions to get familiar on how most of the buildings are created in China.

Assignments mostly involved essays (around 3000 words) and presentations, with no exams. I managed to condense my schedule into three days, leaving time for travel.

However, transitioning back to KTH was tricky, as Tongji's semester formally ended on January 10, leaving little time before KTH's spring semester began on January 14.

City and country

Shanghai is a sprawling, international city. Beyond the financial center, you'll find vibrant local markets, shops, and street food. The excellent metro network, public bikes, and Didi (China's Uber) make getting around easy. However, English speakers are rare, so a translator app is essential.

While Shanghai offers plenty of cultural activities, language and cultural barriers can make it challenging to discover events. I highly recommend exploring rural China—distances are vast, but the high-speed train network makes travel convenient.

Leisure and social activities

With many international students at Tongji, making friends is easy. Although it's harder to connect with Chinese students, it's worth the effort.

Tongji's campus has excellent sports facilities and clubs. Shanghai's development over recent decades has also brought many art museums and theaters, especially along the Huangpu Riverfront.

Sustainability

Traveling to China sustainably is difficult, as flying is the only practical option. The Russian-Ukrainian war has made overland routes inaccessible, but a train journey could have been an incredible 2–3-week adventure.

After you arrive in China, the public transport is great, and it is possible to travel sustainably. There is a strict waste segregation in China, the dorm keepers make sure you don't waste electric energy – high energy demanding devices such as irons are not permitted. Although it is probably related to fire danger of old electricity system in buildings rather than sustainability.

Other recommendations and observations

Write here! Do you have any other recommendations or tips? Feel free to insert pictures into the text.