Experience report

Shanghai International Studies University

(Academic year 2025-2026)

Hello everyone! I have completed a year abroad at SISU through direct exchange and wanted to share my experience and give some advice for people who would like to go on exchange there in the future.

I started preparing for my trip way in advance and researched a lot online and on social media. Installing Chinese apps and getting familiar with them before arrival was also a big help. I researched both questions of settling into daily life such as VPN, accommodation, residence permit, payment options, weather, etc., as well as places in Shanghai I would like to visit. It is impossible to prepare for everything but doing as much research as possible makes the transition period a lot smoother.

So my biggest advice is: do your research! I cannot stress enough how much it helps. China is not a place where you can come completely unprepared and just figure it all out on the spot, especially when it comes to access to internet. You will have a lot of problems if you don't prepare your VPN options in advance (unfortunately, I have first-hand experience from me and my friends who visited me). A tip here: for me, VPN from FU turned out to be the best and most stable option. I never had any problems with it, but you do need to set it up before you leave if you don't have it yet. However, internet access is not the only thing you need to prepare for – many aspects of life here are vastly different from Germany, so knowing the differences beforehand helps avoid a strong culture shock.

In terms of visa application, once you receive the required documents from the host institution, the whole application process is very quick and smooth. I received my visa within a week. If your stay is longer than 6 months, you will need to apply for a residence permit once you arrive. However, a VERY important warning here for students from outside the EU who are studying at FU on a German residence permit: please keep in mind that if you stay outside of Germany for longer than 6 months, your residence permit will be annulled and you will have to apply for a new student visa in Shanghai to enter Germany again. To avoid that, you need to reach out to LEA and let them know about your plans to study abroad so that they could issue a special document for you. Unfortunately, I didn't know about this when I was going to China, and even though I sent a message to LEA just in case a few months before I left, I only received an answer from them 6 months later, so it was too late to receive the document. This whole situation caused me a lot of anxiety and headache, so I hope you can be better prepared for it now that you are informed in advance.

My main goal for coming to SISU was to improve my Chinese language skills, so I chose to enroll into an intensive language course offered by the university. Another option was to attend English-language Master's courses. We had two language classes every day and could also attend English or Chinese-language elective courses about Chinese culture and society. I really enjoyed the language courses and think they helped me greatly improve my language skills. And having elective courses on Chinese film and calligraphy culture was a nice addition to the curriculum.

There is an option to apply for a place at the dorm, which costs 3000 yuan per month. The dorm is basically a hotel where most students share a room with another person. There is an option of a single room, but the places are very limited. Since accommodation at the dorm was not covered by the university, we decided to rent an apartment together with a friend. Even though it is challenging to rent a place as a foreigner here, I don't regret choosing this option, as we managed to find a lovely apartment with the help of a local acquaintance. If you would like to search for a place to rent yourself, the advice that I got and followed myself is that instead of searching for it in advance, it's better to book a hotel for the first week or so and then go to real estate agencies in the neighbourhood (Hongkou district) once you arrive.

In terms of necessary things like sim card, insurance, bank account, etc., you absolutely must buy a sim card once you arrive at the airport, because you need to have internet first before you can do anything. Alternatively, you can get an esim before arrival if it's supported by your phone, but having a Chinese number is also required for many services, so eventually you would have to get a local sim card. I got a temporary sim card for a few weeks at the airport and then on the day of registration at SISU, we could get a sim card with a good deal for the whole year (around 400 yuan). You could also buy the insurance right there, so it was very convenient.

Opening a bank account is kind of a lottery, depending on the employees and your nationality, it might go very easy and smoothly or with some problems. It's better to go to bigger banks like Bank of China or ICBC, but if for some reason they tell you no, you should just go to a few different branches, and it will eventually work out. That's how it was in my case.

You don't need any special transport card; you can just pay with Alipay for both metro and buses. Getting a subscription for bike renting is great because it's the most convenient way of getting around, and rentable bikes are everywhere. For long-distance travel you will need to install an official app from the train service or buy the tickets through Trip.com.

Shanghai has a lot of nice spots to visit for people with all kinds of interests. Go to a bookstore called Duoyun on Shanghai tower's 52nd floor for an amazing view over the city, head to Anfu Road for some shopping and a stroll to enjoy the atmosphere of the French Concession, or visit Jingan, Longhua or Jade Buddha temples for a more traditional experience. And don't miss the countless coffee shops, the coffee culture in Shanghai is great! Can Company, Oaks 19, Coffea Shed are some of my favorites, but there are definitely many, many more.

In my free time outside of studying and doing homework I would mostly go to explore the city with my friends. Shanghai is huge and has so much to offer, so there are always options where to go, whether it's parks, museums, cute cafes, shops or just neighborhoods to walk in. There are also many destinations around Shanghai that only take less than 2 hours by train to reach, so you can easily visit them for a day or a weekend. For example, I went to Suzhou, Nanjing, and Hangzhou, which were lovely, but there are also many smaller water towns which are special to the region. I also joined a dance club at university, so I can recommend exploring some of the university clubs to find more friends than just your classmates. My only regret is that there were not enough opportunities to make Chinese friends because international students were studying in a separate building.

All in all, even though the trip required lots of preparation and settling in was not easy, once I got my life and routine there established, staying in Shanghai was extremely pleasant. I am very satisfied with both the academic aspect of my stay and with my life outside of studying.