

RETURNEE OF THE MONTH

JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2020



THYRA JENSEN

Program: UVA in Shanghai,
Summer 2017

Major: 4th year, Nursing, minor in
East Asian Studies

Affiliations: Sigma Psi Zeta Sorority,
Taiwanese Student Association,
Organization of Young Filipino
Americans

WHY DID YOU GO ON THIS PROGRAM?

I chose to go on this program because I was interested in taking my Chinese language skills to the next level. I have been in and out of various Chinese curriculums for several years: it started when my parents signed me up for Sunday Chinese School when I was in middle school, then continued when I found out the high school I was going to attend was piloting their Chinese program. I decided to continue taking Chinese in high school, but since everyone else was starting as a beginner, I also had to re-learn the basics along with them; by graduation time, my Chinese wasn't as good as I hoped it would be due to this setback. I decided to try learning it again in college, and was encouraged by my UVA Chinese professor, Long Laoshi, to apply for the UVA in Shanghai summer program, since she believed I had the potential to thrive in a totally immersed Chinese environment. At first, I was reluctant because of the program's intensity - 2 semester's worth of Chinese in 8 weeks, as well as a language pledge - but in the end, I decided that after playing it safe for so long with no great progress, the challenge was exactly what I needed.



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HOW WAS STUDYING ABROAD DIFFERENT THAN YOU EXPECTED?

What was harder than I expected? I found out how much I took for granted my ability to effectively communicate back home. Since you take a pledge to not use any English at the program's start, the most frustrating times were when I didn't have the vocabulary to express my thoughts and feelings exactly the way I wanted to, ranging from things as important as challenging the grade I received on an assignment to smaller things like explaining cultural differences between my hometown and Shanghai during a conversation with a teacher's assistant.

What was easier than I expected? The transition to life in Shanghai was not bad and I didn't experience very much "culture shock;" this may be partly because I have visited China before and come from an Asian background, but I mostly attribute it to how welcoming the teachers were, how helpful the rest of the dorm and university staff were, and how interesting the environment was in general - there was always something new to learn and experience to keep you on your toes.

HOW DID YOU BALANCE YOUR BUSY SCHEDULE TO GO ABROAD?

The only times you can go abroad in Nursing school for a whole semester is the fall semester of fourth year due to the nature of nursing school clinical hours and class requirements that you must be at UVA to complete (with the exception of the fall exchange programs in your fourth year); however, summer study abroad and J-terms are fair game, so I took advantage of that. I knew I wanted to study abroad during my college career and didn't want to put it off until my fourth year and risk not getting into the exchange program since spots are limited, so I started looking for experiences as early as possible and ended up doing this one at the end of my first year.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO LIVE IN SHANGHAI?

I loved using the Shanghai metro system to get around to different areas of the city - the stations and trains were incredibly clean, and the maps/routes/stations were easy to follow, and re-loading your metro card with funds was quick and easy. My other favorite part about living in Shanghai was how I could get delicious food and bubble tea for a fraction of what they would cost in the United States! I still miss some of the bubble teas that I was able to get over there that I haven't yet found a decent counterpart here in the States :(Shanghai is also a city with many global connections, so even on days where you started to miss home or wanted to experience something other than Chinese culture, there were many opportunities to do so.



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DID YOU TAKE CLASSES IN CONNECTION TO YOUR MAJOR?

Not necessarily, since the Nursing school does not require us to take language courses; however, the language skills that I picked up through this program will definitely help me to better connect with patients whose first language is Mandarin Chinese and who may feel more comfortable describing their health in their native language than in English.

WHAT WAS YOUR MOST INTERESTING CLASS?

During UVA in Shanghai, you either are taking Chinese 2010 & 2020 or Chinese 3010 & 3020; I was in the 2000's group taking Intermediate Chinese. I found Chinese 2020 to be more interesting because it taught us how to express our thoughts on complex national and social issues that China faces today, and we sometimes would be assigned positions and would have to debate each other in class. When I first signed up for this program, I didn't even dream that I would be able to have a serious conversation on these topics (that I rarely even talk about in English!) in a second language, and realizing that I was capable of that was a rewarding and fulfilling experience!

HOW DID YOUR EXPERIENCE CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR GROWTH?

It was humbling to be in a country where my native language is not the official language. It gave me great insight into what immigrants like my mother and refugees experience when they come to the US, where they must utilize a second language for all aspects of life, from things as simple as identifying products at the grocery store to things as complex as filling out official state paperwork. Since I was able to experience this myself, I was able to gain a more thorough understanding of their struggles as well as a deeper understanding and admiration for their resiliency - I chose to go on this program and my experience may have only lasted 8 weeks, but their experience could be anywhere shorter or longer than that, and something they have little control over. My heightened awareness of this obstacle has helped me to see how limited translation/interpretation services are in our local Charlottesville healthcare system, and I hope it will help me contribute to finding a solution.



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DID YOU BRING ANY TRADITIONS OR HABITS BACK WITH YOU?

In China, people generally serve and drink hot water rather than iced water like we do here in the US, regardless of the temperature outside. I grew to prefer this as well because drinking hot water felt "cozier" and it went down easier than drinking something cold. Since returning, I've bought my own electric kettle and use it everyday so I can enjoy a cup of tea or regular hot water in no time!

WHAT WOULD YOU TELL A STUDENT WHO'S CONSIDERING ATTENDING THE UVA IN SHANGHAI PROGRAM?

Although it may be difficult, follow the language pledge to use no English as faithfully as possible! The 24/7 Chinese practice and full immersion in the language is a hallmark of the UVA in Shanghai program and a huge reason why it is so successful. When you aren't able to fall back on your default native language, you are forced to really brush up on your Chinese skills so that you can communicate. It also encourages you to use the language in creative ways: if there is a word that you don't know in Chinese, you have to pull from your current vocabulary to describe what you want to say in words that you already know. It is definitely difficult and frustrating at times, especially in the beginning when you are not yet used to it; but it does result in growth and Chinese eventually becomes your new "default." The day I realized that my thoughts were in Chinese more often than in English was really cool, and the language pledge encourages that shift. Plus, your teachers will be able to tell who is following the pledge and who isn't because those who follow it show greater improvement - get your money's worth out of the program and just follow it!

