2. CET-Harbin

a. Raymond Gao, CET Harbin Summer 2018 Final Report

Academics

I was in a different situation than most of the other students in the program - I entered CET-Harbin with a solid grasp of conversational Chinese, so I did not take a 1-on-2 class. Rather, I took two 1-on-1 classes and two electives. My 1-on-1 classes were appropriately challenging and the teachers of both were very accommodating, making it clear I should let them know if the workload of the classes were too heavy or too light. I asked my teachers to tailor their instruction toward improving my reading and writing skills, especially in an academic context.

My two electives were Research Topics and Business Chinese. The former was a two person class where my sole classmate was also an advanced heritage speaker; this class also focused on written communication in a academic setting, and included discussions of selected readings, interviews with experts, and student presentations on various topics. I very much enjoyed this course. It had not been offered a couple years, so there were a couple issues at the beginning (i.e. the workload was way too high), but the class became very enjoyable after those issues were ironed out.

Throughout the summer, there were points at which I felt as if I were doing so much work that I was actually learning very little Chinese. I (and most other students) always had a ton of vocabulary to learn in every single class, and once in a while I would take a peek at previous weeks’ vocabulary and find it unfamiliar. My Chinese did improve greatly through CET-Harbin, but I did often feel overwhelmed and that I was not retaining the vast majority of the information that I learned. I slept less than 6 hours every night, on average.

The language pledge was upheld quite well. As far as I know, most students spoke only in Chinese at least until the middle of the program, and the point when many began to revert to English in daily conversation only came 75% of the way through the program.

Living Situation/Roommates

I loved my roommate, but some people did not. I heard some roommate horror stories after the program ended. For the most part, the roommates were really nice and easy to get along with, and I became friends with several Chinese roommates, not just my own. The resident director is great - always helpful and responsive.

The living conditions at CET-Harbin are adequate but not good. The dorm has all the amenities you would expect, except a drying machine (very few places in China have them). The
conditions in the bathrooms were poor; bring or purchase slippers to use for the bathroom. There is no shower stall or curtain, the drain in the floor is not positioned at the lowest point, so there is always a pool of standing water on the ground that often accumulates dirt and hair. The drain also gets clogged frequently, and the faucet in my bathroom would detach from the sink (not a common problem, though, I believe). Also, the CET-Harbin handbook definitely has not been updated for a few years, and mentions that the bathrooms are cleaned by staff each week. This is untrue.

The bathroom is shared by four people, while each room houses two. The furniture is decent, although the light fixture in our room was breaking apart until we alerted the dorm staff. They simply taped it back together, but it worked. The windows in some rooms do not have screens, which is an issue because the rooms lack AC and rely on the windows for cooling. There are many mosquitoes in Harbin. The bed consists of a decades-old mattress pad (no spring mattresses) with an uncountable number of yellow stains, an unfitted sheet that goes over the pad, a pillow, and a thick blanket, which is the only type of covers they provide even for the summer.

There are many options for food on and around campus, including dining halls, a supermarket, local restaurants, and a kitchen in the dorms. At least to me, Chinese food became repetitive quite quickly, and the nearest Western supermarket was a Carrefour about 15 minutes walking from campus. There was also a swimming pool, badminton courts, basketball courts, tennis courts, and rudimentary outdoor exercise apparatuses on campus.

The wifi required a log-in and would limit one single account to two devices at a time, which was annoying. Also, the wifi would automatically log out when not in use, but only on some devices.

Extracurricular Activities

Harbin does not have a lot to do and see, in my opinion. The cultural and historical sites were underwhelming, there were a couple of decent malls, and few bars near campus. The CET-planned weekend trips were pretty fun since they always included free food. A smaller group of students, including myself, also took a weekend trip to the indoor ski center, reputed to be the largest in the world. I also went with another group to see a performance of La Traviata. However, there was a period of about a month during the middle of the program, barring our weekend trip to a local mountain, where I felt as if my entire life revolved around academics, which was not a pleasant feeling.

Final Thoughts

I chose CET-Harbin for its inherently personalized and high-level academics, and was not disappointed with them for the most part. The work I ended up doing in my classes was more rote than I would have liked it to be, and that did sap my motivation a bit throughout the program. Especially at the end, I was itching for it to end. I should not have expected the living
conditions to be better than they were, but I did, and I was disappointed when they did not live up to my expectations. Overall, I’m so very thankful that I had the opportunity to do CET-Harbin and meet the wonderful classmates and teachers that I lived and learned with for two months. I would recommend the program purely on the basis of its excellent academics, while acknowledging its deficiencies in extracurricular life. Thank you so much for a wonderful summer, Light Fellowship!

b. Emily Ji; CET Harbin Summer Report 2018

CET Harbin was such a wonderful and memorable experience, and I am so happy that I chose this program. Prior to this program, I took two L5 Heritage Chinese classes at Yale (CHNS 162 and CHNS 163). My parents are Chinese, so I grew up attending a local Chinese school and listening to them speak Chinese at home. However, I mainly spoke English at home, and I wanted to become more fluent. I felt that CET Harbin was challenging, but in a good way, and my Chinese did improve a lot.

Academics

At CET Harbin, you take 4 classes. 2 of the classes are electives, and there were at most 4 people per class, which was really nice. Most of the elective classes had levels, so you would be placed in a class that was suitable for your skill level. The electives that I chose were Conversation Seminar and Business Chinese. Conversation was my absolute favorite class of the program. We did a lot of oral reports and had a lot of discussions/debates in class, which greatly improved our speaking. Surprisingly, we also discussed many complex/serious topics, such as gender equality, human rights, gun control in America, etc. I liked this because most of the Chinese I knew before CET Harbin was very simple, everyday conversation. I also learned a lot of idioms and common sayings from this class. I also really liked my Business Chinese class. We covered a wide range of topics, such as China’s housing bubble, intellectual property issues in China, China’s middle class, China’s renewable energy sector, etc. I learned a variety of new vocabulary and useful idioms. There is also a one-on-two class, which is 2 students and a teacher. The purpose of this class is to improve your pronunciation and intonation, so that you can speak what is considered 标准普通话. We had to memorize and recite dialogues every day, which was a bit annoying and shows the Chinese way of learning a new language. However, I had a really good partner and teacher so it ended up okay. The last class is a one-on-one class where you can choose any topic of your choice and CET will match you with a professor in that field. My topic was Environmental Protection in China. Overall, it was an okay class. My favorite classes were still my electives.

Living Situation
Students live in Dorm 6 at HIT (Harbin Institute of Technology). I stayed in a suite with 4 people. There were 2 doubles and a bathroom. The bedrooms were actually much nicer than I expected. The rooms looked like they were recently renovated and mine was a good size. Each person has a bed, a desk, a wardrobe, and maybe a dresser. There was only a fan and no AC. It did get really hot one or two weeks; however, Harbin is much cooler than places like Beijing and Shanghai, so I don’t remember the temperature being that big of an issue. The bathroom in the suite is really old and isn’t that pretty, so be prepared for that. There is a toilet and a heated shower. Nevertheless, Dorm 6 is an international student dorm, so our living conditions are still much better than the average Chinese college student’s. I did see the dorm where my Chinese roommate usually lives. The floor where CET students stay also has a kitchen, a room with a sofa and a TV, and a room with a big table that people used to do their homework at night.

Food

There are several cafeterias on campus that are set up like food courts or buffets, so students can pick what they want to eat. The food is just ok, but it is really cheap. My friends and I would eat at the cafeterias for lunch because they were so close by and convenient. However, at night we would eat at restaurants outside of campus. The streets next to campus do have a wide variety of restaurants, and they are pretty good. There is also a KFC nearby if you miss American-esque food.

The campus also has a really well-stocked supermarket, which is super convenient. There are also several coffee shops inside and outside of campus.

Chinese Roommates

The Chinese roommates were amazing. They were honestly my favorite aspect of CET Harbin. Every CET student shares a double with a Chinese roommate who is a student at HIT. My roommate was wonderful, and we became really good friends. She was really busy during the first few weeks because she had final exams but afterwards, we hung out a lot. Some people might have had some roommate issues, but I was really lucky with mine. We went shopping at 凯德 (a nearby mall with a lot of really really good food and desserts), took trips with our friends to places such as the Harbin Siberian Tiger Park and Dalian 大连, ate dinner together, stayed up late at night discussing random but fun/interesting topics like her love of cheese, American politics, the college application process in the U.S. vs. China, finding a boyfriend in college, Chinese dialects etc. I really hope I’ll see her again in the future.

Over the summer, I became friends with many other roommates as well. They were unbelievably friendly and warm and helpful. They were all so excited and willing to hang out with us. Most roommates would accompany us on the weekend trips that CET planned or the ones that we planned ourselves. My friend group of CET students and roommates would eat dinner together, play Catan, go shopping, etc. Having a Chinese roommate is also a great way to practice your speaking skills. I learned so much about Chinese culture and society just by talking
to them. It really was interesting to hear about their experiences growing up in China and their views on topics such as China’s firewall, China’s education system, etc. They also taught us a lot of Chinese slang, which was really fun to learn.

Extracurricular Activities

On the weekends, CET would organize activities for CET students and our roommates. CET took us to places such as Sun Island, Central Street (中央大街), Unit 731 Museum, Harbin Confucius Temple, etc. We also took a long, 2 day weekend trip to 凤凰山 and stayed at a farmer’s house/hotel for a night. We spent 2 days hiking, and the scenery was beautiful. It was really nice to leave the city and see what rural China is like.

It is also really easy to organize your own activities/trips. Harbin has a few train stations, so you can take a train to a nearby city. One weekend, my friends and I went to Dalian 大连, which is a coastal city and is famous for its beaches. Some of my other friends even went to Inner Mongolia one weekend.

Language Pledge

CET Harbin is known for its strict language pledge. I chose CET Harbin because I heard that at other programs, as soon as classes finish, people would start speaking English with their friends. I wanted to fully immerse myself in Chinese and force myself to speak the language as much as possible because I don't do that with my parents. Although it is very difficult to adjust to the pledge at first, I do think that it is one of the best parts of the program. Every time I didn’t know a word in Chinese, I would look it up in Pleco or find another way to explain what I was trying to say. This greatly improved my fluency and vocabulary. After a while, it became really natural to speak Chinese with my friends, especially since we had Chinese roommates. After a few weeks, when I called my friends at home and spoke English, it actually felt so strange. My English vocabulary and grammar were pretty rusty at first, which was kind of funny. When I called my parents, I was actually preferred speaking Chinese with them over English! This honestly made me so happy because it meant that speaking Chinese was becoming more and more natural.

Advice

CET Harbin is very rigorous and there is a lot of homework. However, it is really important to take time to just walk around the city or hang out with the Chinese roommates. Some nights I felt that I spent too much time on homework and sacrificed opportunities to improve my Chinese in other ways, such as talking with my roommate or local people. 2 months fly by faster than you think.

I honestly loved my time at CET Harbin, and I strongly recommend this program to Yale students. Thank you so much to the Light Foundation for giving me this incredible and valuable opportunity to study abroad. I really did have an unforgettable summer.
c. Frida Calderon; CET Harbin Summer Report 2018

At the risk of repeating information given by other students, I would like to begin this report with a brief description of the program's structure.

*Academics:*

At the beginning of the program, CET gives a placement test to all students that consists of multiple choice and a speaking exam – they did not test our handwriting or writing abilities in general (this will be an important detail later). Students are given a choice of two classes to accompany their pre-selected one-on-one course and the mandatory one-on-two speaking drill course. A very popular choice was newspaper reading, and a lot of advanced students took the classical Chinese course – I took the “口语” class, which was very similar to CHNS150 at Yale in the focus of the content, and a composition course. These classes are all split into different levels of skill, and students are placed according to their placement test scores. Class schedules can vary WIDELY depending on the courses you choose, but overall, classes are in session from 8am to 5pm, Monday to Friday.

While during the CET Presentation at Yale, out-of-classroom academic activities that provided the opportunity to interact with locals in a guided manner were stressed as an integral part of the CET Harbin curriculum, this was mostly untrue and in turn quite disappointing. My personal experience with the CET Harbin housing director was very positive - she was incredibly supportive and understanding of my medical concerns and anything I encountered in my daily life that may have required her help. I am in general very grateful for the teacher's support this summer. All of the teachers were absolutely wonderful!

*Excursions and Weekends:*

CET organized a weekend excursion every Saturday to see Temples, Old Harbin, and other attractions – there was also a weekend overnight trip organized to FengHuangShan. All CET organized activities were nice in that there was a lot of freedom and independence involved – students were not babied but safety was also always ensured. Individually, students sometimes went to bars or KTV for the weekend – there was also a relatively popular dancing club closer to the downtown area. Going to 中央大街 (Central Street) to stroll shop was also quite popular!

I also ought to mention that CET allows weekend trips outside of Harbin, which many students thought was really great (myself included) – some students went to Inner Mongolia, Dalian, and a nearby hot-spring for weekend trips. I know that in the past, students have taken excursions to the North-Korean border (this year such excursions were NOT allowed because of safety concerns).
**Housing and Roommates:**

Honestly when one is randomly assigned a roommate (because even though CET makes the American students fill out a rooming preference form, Chinese roommates all said they filled out no such thing!) there are bound to be hits-and-misses. While students were also prepared for cultural differences and misunderstandings, no amount of optimism and perseverance could have helped out some of the students in certain rooming situations throughout the program. I heard of everything from refusing to turn the fan on during 90-degree weather, to uncomfortable nudity, body-shaming, refusing to speak at a slower pace or repeat words that students did not understand, to jumping on the bed while screaming and crying on the phone at 6am.

To be fair, I think that a lot of the issues that came up between roommates were never approached by the uncomfortable non-Chinese party, and thus went unresolved. When these concerns were brought up to the residential director they were, to my knowledge, almost always brushed off as cultural differences. Students with a lower level of conversational Chinese would be at a massive disadvantage when treading sensitive topics, and students who have a more introverted nature overall would also feel uncomfortable at having to tackle such a difficult conversation without some kind of real guidance.

A word of caution for Heritage Speakers who speak Chinese at a very advanced level: I cannot speak to the experience of a heritage speaker in China overall, as I am not a heritage speaker myself. I also cannot speak to what a heritage speaker might face at a different program - however, I found that the way staff and teachers treated a few very high-level speaking ethnically Chinese students was plainly unacceptable. A very close friend was constantly degraded by a few specific teachers, and held to an impossible standard of perfection regarding her assignments. Her concerns regarding cultural differences were always brushed off, and she was expected to act Chinese in every way. While such occurrences may be expected when interacting with everyday citizens, teachers ought to be trained and more conscious of the nuances surrounding heritage speakers.

Overall, while I cannot say that I was outright disappointed with my choice to attend CET Harbin over another CET program or a different program overall, I do think that CET Harbin has a lot to consider when it comes to the structure of the curriculum and the way in which certain sensitive topics are handled by faculty. I am, of course, still very grateful that I had the opportunity to have such an experience, and that I was able to meet so many wonderful people! Thank you, Light Fellowship!