7. CET-Kunming

a. Ken Tanaka, Summer 2019 Final Report

Introduction

A good amount of Yalies on the Light Fellowship probably won't consider studying in Kunming. Some might not even know that Kunming exists. Others might think that Kunming, a city with a measly population of 6.2 million in far-off Yunnan province, isn't as fun to spend the summer at in comparison to glitzy Shanghai or iconic Beijing. Yet some more students might automatically choose a program like HBA - after all, HBA is abound with Yale students, and who wouldn't want to spend some time in China with people you already know from school?

If you don't consider Kunming as a potential place to study at, I'm going to keep it real with you and say that you're making a big mistake. Choosing to study Chinese through CET-Kunming has been one of the greatest experiences of my college time, and I believe that CET-Kunming, while perhaps not as renown as PiB, HBA, or ICLP, is truly a hidden gem.

My name is Ken Tanaka, and I'm a current junior (class of 2021) majoring in Global Affairs. I took a year of Chinese my junior year of high school (equivalent to L1 here), and then took CHNS120, CHNS 130, and CHNS140 my freshman spring through my sophomore spring.

As I was not a freshman when considering studying abroad in China, I will admit that I was a little bit hesitant at first when considering study abroad - after all, many of my peers were applying for internships. Looking back, I'm very glad I chose to go abroad. Not only was I able to partake in a fun experience that I really only have the opportunity to do while at Yale, but my Mandarin skills improved greatly.

Choosing a Program

After choosing to go abroad, I then had to choose which program to attend. I ended up applying/getting into three programs: CET-Kunming, Harvard-Beijing Academy, and Princeton in Beijing. All three programs are wonderful programs, and so I had a hard time choosing which program to attend. I eventually chose to go to CET-Kunming because of a number of reasons which I'll elaborate on below. Note that I won't be talking about the reasons I liked the other programs because I don't feel that's particularly relevant, given that I did not attend those programs.

Kunming, the city: I'll be the first to admit that Kunming might not be the most 'fun' or 'lit' city in China. It's not as developed as Shanghai, nor does it have the political and cultural clout of Beijing. That being said, I still chose Kunming, and am very glad I chose it, for a number of reasons. Firstly, Kunming is a very livable city. You won't ever see crowds like those in Shanghai or Beijing for anything, and there's no air pollution. The temperature is always nice
as well, and doesn't get burning hot in the summer like in Beijing. Given that you're going to spend at least two months studying Chinese, I recommend that you choose a place where you can live well, and not just somewhere that you can have a lot of fun. Furthermore I chose Kunming because of its remoteness and smaller size. I wanted a non-traditional experience of being in a Chinese city that's not as well known as Beijing/Shanghai, because I felt that that was, in some sense, a more 'authentic' experience than being in a big touristy city. You can go to Shanghai and Beijing anytime, but Kunming? That's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Finally, I chose Kunming because the city and its province, Yunnan Province, is known for having a lot of ethnic minorities. While some may erroneously assume that the Chinese people are a monolithic group, that's not true. Apart from the Han Chinese (the majority ethnic group), China has 55 minority groups, each with their unique culture and history. Yunnan Province is known for having 25 ethnic minorities, and, being quite interested in learning about a lesser-known side of China, I chose to go to Kunming in the hopes of learning more about Chinese ethnic minorities. And I did - one of my close friends that I met at a Jeet Kwon Do studio was Hui Chinese.

Roommate

At this program, each study abroad student is paired with a student from the local university (Yunnan University) as a roommate, and the two of you live together for two months. I really looked forward to this aspect, because that would not only give me a local friend, but would also allow me to practice my Chinese and get to know Chinese culture more.

Program Size and Makeup:

The total program size is fairly small, although my particular summer it was probably larger than average, as we had 35 students total across the three grade levels. I valued this when choosing a program, as I thought a smaller class size and program size would mean more teacher attention for me as well as ease in getting to know everyone. Also, there aren't that many Yale students, so you actually get to escape the Yale bubble somewhat and meet friends from across the United States attending all different schools. Eight out of the 35 were Yale students, however, so that was also nice - I was able to make new Yale friends as well as many new non-Yale friends.

Post-Program Thoughts

Academics: CET-Kunming, being a relatively small program, usually has three levels - second grade (so if the last class you took was L2), third grade (if the last class you took was L4), and fourth grade. I was placed in the third grade class, coming out of L4 at Yale. I thought the class started off a bit slow but quite quickly grew challenging, and when we switched textbooks, the curriculum got even harder. All in all, I thought the grade I was placed into was a
good fit and prepared me for taking CHNS 154 at Yale. Also, the teachers are all amazing and really are invested in helping you learn. I will say that one thing to know about studying in China is that there's a good amount of repetition in saying what the teacher says, so be prepared for that.

**Roommate**

I want to preface this by saying that I believe that the roommate aspect of this program is awesome. Most of the roommates are amazing, and some I traveled to different parts of China with and still keep in touch with today. That being said, my particular roommate experience was not that great. I was initially matched with one roommate, and I was super excited to be his roommate because we had a lot of similarities and interests. However, a week in the program, his particular department suddenly did not allow him to continue participating. So, CET had to find me a new roommate, and obviously given the urgency of finding me a new roommate, they were unable to focus on finding me an equally-suitable roommate. My second, and long-term roommate, was a great roommate in the sense that he was pretty clean and not often in the room. However, he did not participate in almost any CET programs, and I was disappointed because I had come to the program hoping that I'd become close friends with my roommate. He would never really ask me to do anything, which was surprising, because most of the other roommates would always be eager to do stuff with their foreign roommates. He even left for a week to go do some research or something. However, at the end of the day, it wasn't as bad as I thought because I became quite close to other roommates, who became good friends of mine. So, I guess the point I want to make is that, while you will likely get a great roommate, there's a small chance you might not. But, don't let that stop you from attending, because even if, in the worst case scenario you and your roommate aren't a great fit, there will be other roommates to be friends with.

**Extracurriculars**

In an ordinary week, you can participate in calligraphy, tai-chi, and Jeet Kwon Do (Bruce Lee's martial art). I went to all three every week, except for the one time I napped and missed a tai-chi practice. All are very fun and are a good way to not only learn about Chinese culture outside of the classroom, but also practice Chinese and make friends. I actually got really into Jeet Kwon Do and would even go on days where I would be the only foreigner there, and I made a good friend there who ended up becoming my language partner.

**Housing**

There's two buildings that you get placed into. Building 4 is the building that has slightly better rooms and is in the same building as the classrooms, so very convenient. Building 1 is like 30 seconds walk away and has the activity room, which has good WiFi, as well as the laundry machines. Because you stay in the Yunnan University Hotel, you get room service, which takes out your trash, changes your towels, etc etc every day. I found my room to be quite pleasant.
Language Pledge

Quite strictly enforced, but of course, it's what you make of it. Definitely do try to adhere to it, as it will improve your Chinese quite well. I thought at the beginning that I would not be able to have conversations any deeper than surface-level small talk when using Chinese, but that's not true. You really do get to learn how to use Chinese to express yourself deeply.

Things to Do

There's a lot of stuff to do in Kunming. You can hike Xishan and get great views of the city, go to museums and learn about cool stuff like the Flying Tigers, go to Yuantong Temple, find and eat exotic fruits at the many fruit stands, take a walk around Cuihu Lake, admire the beautiful scenery of Yunnan University's Campus, and go to Dianchi Lake, among others. You can also go to nightclubs and party. There are also many famous cities and locations just a few hours by train away, like Dali, Lijiang, Puzhehei, etc that you can definitely just take a weekend to go to. More adventurous people who want to ride the train for longer can even go to Shangri-La or Chengdu.

Staff

In one word: Amazing

Conclusion

I wrote a lot, and there's a lot that I didn't include in here. But I hope I got the more important parts of my experience down, and I hope that, for anyone thinking about studying in China or considering studying at CET-Kunming, this will be of help.

Feel free to contact me anytime through email at ken.tanaka@yale.edu. I'd be more than happy to meet up to answer any questions you may have!

And finally, thank you to the Light Fellowship, Chinese teachers at Yale, and everyone else that made my awesome time in China possible.

再见 for now!

b. Abigail Long, 2019 Final Report

Overall Assessment

I would recommend the CET Kunming program to prospective study abroad students. It was a good academic environment and the course was hosted at Yunnan University, which is located in the most dynamic and lively part of the city. Before this course I was enrolled in L4
Chinese, and found that the class I placed into was very fitting for my language ability. I would not recommend students with more advanced language skills attend this program as there were limited upper level classes.

**Academics**

Each day Monday through Thursday we has class from 8.30-12.00 and then a 30 minute tutorial in the afternoon. Classes were well taught and the instructors were usually very helpful and willing to meet after class if any topics were confusing. The grading system was a little unclear and the expectations somewhat ill defined with regards to essays and homework, which was unfortunate, but many students expressed their displeasure with this and so hopefully next year these problems will be resolved. Outside of class, around 2-3 hours of homework could be expected on any given night, but the weekends were usually pretty open for exploring the city or traveling around the province. This program did have a language pledge, however the programs implementation of the language pledge was a little troublesome. For example, one day during the first week the program director unexpectedly forced us all to undergo medical testing that was required by the university. These tests were somewhat invasive, including blood tests, x-rays, etc. When some of us tried to talk to the director in English to try to figure out what was going on, she reprimanded us and did not explain. Further more, the medical exam required GYNECOLOGICAL exams for female students 😞😞😞. These tests were never explained nor where we told beforehand. I understand the tests may have been university policy, but the CET program should have been more informative about what was going to happen before the doctors brought out the needles 😞.

**Cultural**

Kunming is a diverse and interesting city. I loved learning about all the ethnic minorities living in Yunnan and being able to see how these different cultures influenced the cities past and present. Just to note, if you are Catholic or Jewish, I would not recommend telling anyone. Some people, including one of the local roommates, frequently expressed their disapproval of these religions.

**Housing and Food**

The food in Kunming is amazing. It is delicious, inexpensive, flavorful, and has influences from all over China and Southeast Asia. Because of Kunming's Muslim population, there are often times lots of Halal options as well. Housing was in a hotel, so the hotel staff cleaned our rooms every day. This summer was the cleanest I have ever been able to keep a room!

In summary the biggest "ups" of the program were:
- the housing
- the food
- travel opportunities around beautiful Yunnan
- responsive language instructors
- virtually no pollution and beautiful weather

The biggest "downs" of the program were:
- no communication regarding invasive medical testing
- CET administration's poor responsiveness to students concerns throughout the program. (One student wanted to change roommates after his roommate repeatedly expressed that he did not like Jewish people and made comments like "If you're Jewish you can't be American" and more derogatory comments that I won't repeat, but the program director did not complete the change.)

Overall, CET Kunming was a positive experience and helped me improve my language ability. If I was to choose again, I would picked a different program, but CET helped me fulfill my goals for this summer. Kunming is AMAZING and everyone who goes to China should visit or spend some time there, but maybe try to find a program other than CET or make sure to be very proactive about self advocation with the CET administration!!

c. Shaley Martin, 2019 Final Report

Academics

The teachers gave us a placement test to split us into three classes. I had already taken through Chinese 151, so I ended up in fourth year, the most advanced class. The basic schedule for all the classes was the same: about four hours of class a day from Monday to Thursday, then a test on Friday. The first couple days were intimidating because for somebody without much speaking experience, the teachers’ questions were rapid-fire and the subject matter was often abstract. “I don’t know! I don’t know what I think about the effect of industrialization on the urban-rural gap in China over the past decade!” But of course, nobody expected us to say everything right the first time. That’s what drill class is about: the teacher listened to our messed-up sentences, made them into real ones that a native speaker would ostensibly say or write, and had us repeat them until we sounded convincing.
One-on-one class was much less intimidating than large-group class. It was a chance to ask my teachers about topics I was interested in. I mentioned that I wanted to learn about China’s linguistic diversity, particularly the local 方言, Kunminghua. Turns out, one of our teachers grew up in the Kunming area and spoke it, so she taught me a few words and also some of Kunminghua’s history.

Some people took about two hours to do their homework each day; for some people it was closer to six; and I took about four. Homework ate up enough time that I felt like a real student, but also still left time to explore Kunming and hang out with friends.

The TAs also have office hours Monday through Thursday, and whenever there happened not to be anybody there asking, you know, actual questions about our actual homework, I really enjoyed going to talk to them about other topics. For example, some were majoring in teaching Chinese as a second language. I asked how their methods differed from the way people learn English as a second language in China, and how they thought those differences had come about.

Language Pledge

The language pledge seemed perfectly natural when talking with Chinese people. It felt a little awkward at first with other English-speaking students, though. As you might expect, there was a lot of pantomiming and a lot of Pleco (a downloadable Chinese-English dictionary). And of course, it’s difficult to really get to know somebody in a language neither of you speak very well, so we often lamented still being only “surface friends” even after spending two months around each other. But without the language pledge, we wouldn’t have learned as much Chinese. It’s that simple. Really. I’m lazy. I didn’t want to Pleco my way through every conversation, so I started remembering stuff.

Kunming

The weather really is as great as they say. Our teachers were almost apologetic when the first couple weeks proved warmer than the usual Kunming summer. “It’s never this hot!” By “hot” they meant sometimes it threatened to approach 80 degrees. A typical week had some rain and some seventies-and-sunny days.

When I read that Kunming had five million people, I had prepared for constant crowds and jostling. But it turned out to be pretty relaxed, and if I walked around earlyish in the morning, hardly anybody else was even out. Shop owners always said “慢走” or “walk slow”
when I walked out the door. Of course that’s just an expression, but at least around Yunnan University, where things were winding down for the summer, people really did walk slow.

Practical Things

In most places, my VPN was of no use. It did work in areas with CET-provided WiFi, which was great because it proved necessary for some homework.

My roommate and I weren’t exactly sure where to hang our clothes to dry. Some people had a handy-dandy clothesline outside their floor, but we didn’t, so we ended up using the wardrobe and the shower. That worked, too, as long as we remembered to keep the wardrobe open so nothing molded. And as long as I remembered, on mornings that clothes were drying, not to wander into the bathroom half asleep and turn on the water to shower.

Extracurriculars

CET arranged optional free tai chi, art, and jeet kwon doe classes for us. Jeet kwon doe was especially fun because some Kunming residents—not just CET students—also took the class. And who doesn’t love a martial art invented by Bruce Lee? I’ll never forget the situps, which required three people: one person did the situp, another person held that person’s feet, and a third whacked the sitter-upper’s belly every rep.

I also attended a Christian church while in Kunming, sometimes going to the Chinese service, sometimes to the Chinese-English service in which an interpreter translated everything line by line. The church also had a bilingual Chinese-English Bible study. The situation was a lot like our language pledge—people who basically all shared a common language intentionally forsaking the ease of that language, but at the same time, needing to express deep and complex thoughts. People would tell me in shaky English what they thought a particular passage meant, and I would reply in shaky Chinese. Nothing like breezing past all that awkward and getting your point across!

Travel

The program organized free trips most weekends, mostly with the aim of getting us out of the city to see some nature. In Dali, we climbed Cang Mountain and then took the cable car down. I had never taken a cable car before, so I screamed for the first few minutes even though we were only going about two miles per hour. Eventually I calmed down, but then my seatmate
pointed out several graves below us—some people think it’s auspicious to be buried on this mountain, she said—and I started screaming again.

People also arranged their own trips on weekends—some took the high-speed train all the way to Sichuan Province, and some even flew to Tibet or Shangri-la. A few friends and I went to a town called Lijiang. Its famous Old Town district was quite commercialized, but still fun. The hostel cost about five US dollars per night, which sounds sketchy, but it really wasn’t. The high-speed train is also comfortable (Amtrak, why don’t you give people this much leg room?) and reasonably priced.

Roommate

My roommate was great. She was very busy, so we didn’t often get meals together, but anytime I needed help with something that required speaking Chinese or understanding how things work in China, she was ready and willing to help. For example, the first time I tried to withdraw money using my American credit card, the ATM wanted me to feed it a six-digit PIN. Of course I only had a four-digit! I didn’t realize four-digit PINs weren’t a worldwide phenomenon! She accompanied me to bank after bank and explained the problem to employee after employee— over my panicked blubbering— until we finally found one ATM in one bank that liked my credit card.

I interviewed my roommate pretty often for class about things like Sino-American relations or young Chinese people’s views on premarital cohabitation. But it was also fun just talking about our favorite shows and music and discovering we both loved watching SpongeBob and listening to “Country Roads.” Future Light fellows reading this: Please be extra good to your roommate! They are volunteers! There’s no reason for them to do this besides wanting to help out and make some new friends!

Food

Yunnan University’s cafeteria food is cheap and good. It had more oil and red peppers than what I was used to from American food, but also more flavor. I don’t really like meat, so I thought it would be hard to find food in Kunming, but it turned out to be very easy. If I had been a strict vegetarian, maybe not, because you never know when a broth will have some pork drippings in it, or when a vegetable dish will have tiny surprise pieces of preserved fish. But we also went to some completely vegetarian restaurants where the tofu did such a good job imitating meat that I didn’t like it.
To try Kunming-specific foods you have to look outside the cafeteria. The Kunming specialty that gets all the hype is Crossing the Bridge Noodles, 过桥米线, but there’s lots more worth trying, like 炒饵块 (stir-fried chewy rice cakes) and sweet congee.

Kunming fruit is also great. I got to try all kinds of fruits that you mainly only find in a can in the U.S., if that. Mangosteens. Passionfruit. The trifecta: lychees, longans, and rambutans. My Chinese name is 雪梨 or snow pear, and snow pear is also a real fruit that some people eat, and I became one of those people. The fruit guy and I were on a first-name basis by the end of the summer, so we always had a good laugh whenever I asked him for a few 雪梨, a few of myself.

d. Vivian Yi, 2018 Final Report

Academics & CET Organized Events:

This summer, CET Kunming offered 2nd through 4th year Chinese, and after the initial placement test (written and oral), I was placed into 4th year, along with three other classmates. Placement exam results are flexible—four other students transferred from 3rd year to 4th year over the next couple of days, so our final class size was eight students. In my opinion, the range in Chinese proficiency in our class was pretty big. As a heritage student, I had no trouble with the listening and speaking expectations of our class, but struggled a little more with the writing and reading expectations.

We had about 3-4 hours of class each day. Morning classes were divided into three sections: main class, drill class, and discussion. In the afternoons, we had one-on-one discussions and language practice. Main class was led by the level’s main instructor, and all other classes were led by TAs, grad students at Yunnan University. There was a lot of homework each day, although for the most part, I don’t think it was an unreasonable amount.

I really liked our 4th level main teacher, Zhang Laoshi. She came across as a very experienced and capable instructor, and she put a lot of emphasis on outside-of-the-classroom learning, in that she organized many activities to engage students in more active language learning. For example, we first read about NGOs in Yunnan province, and then actually had the chance to listen to and speak with a couple of people who worked at and founded NGOs. She was very culturally open and accepting of many different opinions from students. The TAs (grad
students from Yunnan University) seemed less certain, and overall more culturally unaware of different opinions and viewpoints.

CET organizes many activities for students. Every Wednesday, we would have Chinese table, which meant that CET treated us to a meal and we had the chance to practice Chinese with our classmates and teachers. There were often weekend trips planned as well, to places like the Bamboo Temple, Fuxian Lake, Shilin, and of course the Long Weekend Trip to Dali. CET also organizes extra-curriculars (Taichi, Calligraphy, and Kungfu) for students during the week.

The normal resident director, Alex, was away this summer doing research in Dali, so our resident director this year was a temporary substitute of sorts. He had actually attended the CET Kunming program a couple of years ago. However, since this was his first time managing a program like this, I got the feeling that his lack of experience led to the program being less well-organized.

Roommate & Living Situation:

When I first arrived in Kunming, I felt incredibly lucky to have my roommate around to help me figure out the cafeteria, buying toiletries, and just getting set up during those first couple of days. Since my spoken Chinese was pretty passable even at the beginning of the program, I bonded with my roommate, a rising 4th year undergraduate French major, very quickly.

One thing I will note is that Yunnan University actually has two campus locations: the original campus and the new one, which is about an hour away by public bus. The CET program takes place on the original campus, and the vast majority of roommates are from the original campus, but a couple, including my roommate, are from the new campus, which means that they aren’t actually too familiar with the surrounding shops and environment. This wasn’t really a huge problem for me, since I eventually became friends with other roommates and other local students, but it made looking for restaurants and buying non-overpriced necessities and fruit a little trickier at the very beginning of the program.

For most of the program, I got along very well with my roommate. Before this program, I had never interacted meaningfully or deeply with similarly aged Chinese students, and I consider the conversations I had with my roommate invaluable to gaining a better understanding of Chinese culture. We talked at length about the college entrance exams in China, freedom of media, study-abroad opportunities for Chinese university students, and different attitudes towards gender in China and the US. My roommate was pretty open-minded, as are most Chinese young people attending university. (I had a lot of fun introducing her to Netflix’s Queer Eye!)
My issues with my roommate were mainly due to differences in living habits, like different sleeping habits and cleaning habits. CET does have you fill out a rooming form, but I don’t think my living habits were especially compatible with my roommate. It really wasn’t a problem for the first month or so, but by end of the program, I was very ready to be finished cohabitating with my roommate.

Students and Chinese roommates live in the Yunnan University Hotel, which is set up like a standard two bed hotel room. Each room has a TV and private bathroom, but very little storage space. The bathroom is set up like a traditional Chinese bathroom, meaning that there is no separate area for showering; everything is just sort of thrown together in the bathroom. The bedrooms are cleaned everyday (trash emptied, toilet paper restocked, beds made, etc.) and sheets are changed once a week. Laundry is a little tricky in Kunming. We had two washing machines, but I ended up hand washing everything since I was warned that the washing machines tended to stretch out your clothes. There are no drying machines, which means that if you want to do laundry, you have to time it so that you can hang your clothes outside on the clotheslines.

**Kunming (Food, Environment, etc.)**

Literally everyone will tell you about how good the weather in Kunming is—and they are absolutely right. Expect the weather to be cooler and much more comfortable than summer in the USA, which means you should pack more long pants and sweaters than you might expect for July in China. Yunnan University’s campus is very green and beautiful, and right next to campus there is Cuihu Park, an incredibly lush space in the middle of an otherwise busy city.

Very few people speak English in Kunming, which I actually preferred because it made living in China seem more “authentic.” In general, I would say there is less Western influence in Yunnan province in general, at least compared to other Chinese cities along the Eastern coastline that I have previously visited. Western style food is not so common, and much more expensive than Chinese style food. The food in Kunming tends to be spicy, salty, and oily. I liked it, but it was a little much for my stomach at times.

**Travel:**

There are many, many incredible choices for independent travel (relatively) near and around Kunming. For someone who has only ever been in China’s modern city environments, travel in Yunnan was a totally new experience—lots of greenery and rolling hills, water buffalo in the streets, etc. Almost everyone, myself included, took a weekend to travel to Puzhehei, and I
would highly recommend. CET also organizes some travel opportunities, such as the Dali overnight trip and a visit to the Stone Forest. Personally, I passed up some of the CET travel opportunities in exchange for independent travel plans, which I am glad I did, because I don’t especially love traveling in large groups. I also ended up visiting Shilin twice: the first time was a day trip to the scenic area and Jiuxiang caves with a high school friend who came to visit me in Kunming, and the second time was with a multiple day trip to celebrate the Torch Festival in and around the city center. 火把节, the Torch Festival, is an important Yi ethnic minority holiday, and I was lucky to have the chance to experience it—overall, very memorable. The entire holiday centers around lighting and carrying huge torches and lighting open fires in the streets, so yes, maybe it was a little dangerous, but lots of fun! In particular, people in Shilin have a tradition of smearing other people’s faces with fallen ashes from the ground; this includes friends, of course, but also just any passing strangers in the street.

Popular travel destinations among the other students in the program included Lijiang, Tiger Leaping Gorge, and the Yuanyang Rice Terraces.

**Bonus: Being Chinese-American in China:**

This was interesting; since I look ethnically Han Chinese, many people in China automatically assumed I was from China, including some of the roommates, who thought I was there as a roommate, not as a student. A couple of them were confused as to why I was studying Chinese. Many of my classmates had the shared experience of Chinese locals gawking, or taking their photo without asking, but I never experienced any of that. For me, it was new and interesting to live in a place where the majority of other people look like me, and I’m very glad and incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to study in Kunming this summer.