5. Hopkins-Nanjing Center for Chinese and American Studies

a. Christine Wang, Fall 2018 Interim Report

Thank you to the Light Fellowship for providing this wonderful opportunity to study at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center this year! After completing the first semester of the program, here are some thoughts on the program thus far -- hopefully they will be helpful to anyone considering this program in the future!

**Academics**

The HNC program is rather different from the other Light-approved Chinese programs, in that it's not primarily a language learning program, but a graduate-level coursework program. While your Chinese skills will undoubtedly improve, the academics are not structured in such a way that language improvement is the central focus. Thus, there are no vocabulary lists/tests, no grammar lessons, no pronunciation drills, etc. For people who are looking first and foremost to learn more Chinese and focus on improving their speaking/reading/writing/listening in a structured environment, this is probably not the best program. In the same vein, this is absolutely a program for people who already have a very strong base level in Chinese (you’ll be required to take a language test as part of your application anyway, so that will give you an idea of how strong it needs to be), as you’re really thrown right in to doing graduate level courses in Chinese.

However, for people who are interested in the areas that the HNC offers coursework in (international relations/politics; international economics; international law; energy, resources, and environment; and the humanities-focused China studies), I think this is a phenomenal program. It allows you to improve your Chinese through practical and specialized application. You’ll be reading academic articles in Chinese, listening to professors lecture in Chinese, writing academic essays in Chinese, giving presentations in Chinese, etc. In that sense, your Chinese will definitely still improve a lot – just in a much more self-directed and applied manner. Personally, this was the big appeal of the program to me, and so far it’s very much met or surpassed my expectations. My language skills have really improved, but I’ve also been able to learn a lot outside of language skills through the courses I’ve taken – as someone who’s always been interested in energy and environment but hadn’t really taken courses for it at Yale, this has been an incredible academic opportunity. For people who have already done a lot of Chinese language learning courses, I think this is a much more interesting way to improve your Chinese.

You’ll be required to take three courses in Chinese each semester, with the option to add up to two more courses in either Chinese or English on top of them. Most of the people here did either just three Chinese courses or three Chinese courses + one English course the first
semester; I would absolutely not recommend doing more than the latter, as adjusting to taking grad-level courses in Chinese is quite stressful and difficult, especially during the first few weeks – doing the readings was definitely a struggle! However, I would definitely recommend doing an English class if you feel up to it, as they’re really interesting (if anything, you’ll have trouble narrowing yourself down to three or four courses – I certainly did!). The professors vary in quality, as they do at any university, but are generally quite good (a couple of them are actually quite well-known in their field in China) and very accessible outside of class, as they have offices/office hours inside the Center itself. Coursework/workload varies a lot between classes, but is generally a combination of short/long essays, in-class presentations, and written or oral exams.

As a side note, something I found out about this program after coming here is that the one-year Certificate at the HNC can later be applied as basically two semesters worth of credit toward a master’s at Johns Hopkins SAIS, provided you apply to SAIS within five years of completing HNC, so for people interested in pursuing future studies in IR/SAIS offered fields it’s also a great opportunity in that respect.

Center Life

Every Certificate student lives within the Center itself (the HNC is its own building on the edge of the Nanjing University campus, and all HNC dorms and classrooms are contained within that building). Short of student number/gender imbalances, all Certificate students also have a Chinese roommate who is also a student at the Center. This can be a really awesome opportunity to improve your Chinese with a native speaker and build cross-cultural connections. However, something to keep in mind is that there’s no Chinese language pledge at the Center, and just as international students are at the HNC to learn and improve in Chinese, Chinese students are there to learn and improve in English, so it won’t be as thorough of a language immersion as other programs might have.

As mentioned above, the HNC building contains the dorms and classrooms, as well as its own cafeteria, student lounges, library, study rooms, etc. – in a lot of ways, it’s quite similar to a residential college with the addition of classrooms. The HNC cafeteria is incredibly cheap but of average to not great quality, depending on who you ask; likely, you’ll eat some meals (especially lunches) there but a lot of meals in nearby restaurants (of which there are plenty). The facilities are quite good and a lot of students spend most of their time in the Center, whether for studying or hanging out. There’s not a lot of students and almost everyone is in the same building, so it becomes quite a close-knit community where everyone recognizes everyone else. The flip-side of this, though, is that even though it’s on the Nanjing University campus, the HNC is quite self-contained, so you don’t necessarily get a lot of contact with NU unless you actively went and sought it out (I haven’t really). I have bumped into and made friends with some international students from NU, as their dorm is nearby and they hang out a lot at the cafes/bars around the HNC.
In addition to classes, the HNC also has things like guest lectures (almost every week) and extracurricular classes (the ones offered this semester were calligraphy, erhu, and tai-qi; I took calligraphy, which met weekly and was a great way to destress and take a break from stressful coursework). It also has its own career services center and access to Johns Hopkins job databases; I’ve used the latter a bit, but unfortunately the previous career services director just left this semester and the new one won’t be coming until after this winter break, so I can’t really comment on that. Hopefully by the final report I’ll have some things to say about it!

Living in Nanjing

For me, the fact that the program is in Nanjing is a huge plus. I knew I didn’t really want to study in Beijing or Shanghai – both are too big and hectic for me – and Nanjing strikes a really nice balance as a “Tier 2 city.” It’s not a huge metropolis, so things are much more laid back, streets and public transport aren’t constantly crowded, and prices are a little lower, which in my opinion makes it easier to adjust to living here; but it’s also a large enough – and historically significant enough! – city that there’s quite a bit to do. There’s quite a few hiking spots nearby (I’ve been to Purple Mountain, but there’s a few other mountains around the city as well), some great museums, and nice temples. It’s also close to a lot of interesting cities via train – Shanghai, Hangzhou, Suzhou, etc. – that are convenient weekend trips or places to go during breaks. It can be pretty easy to get stuck in the HNC bubble, especially once you start getting very busy (which is immediately…), but there’s tons to do if you force yourself to get out.

Closing Thoughts

As stressful and difficult as the academics have been at times, I’ve really enjoyed my time so far at HNC and in Nanjing. This definitely isn’t a program for everyone, but for people who are interested in the coursework HNC offers, it’s an incredible and unique opportunity among the Light-approved programs that I would very strongly recommend considering!