I imagine that those who might come across this corner of the Internet are considering time abroad in China, or might even have already decided to go, and are browsing for tips. I have good news: spending time in Beijing while taking classes at IUP can be extremely meaningful! Hopefully I can convey a snapshot of my experience.

Beijing is a mind-consuming, thrumming, awe-inspiring city. There were days when I’d wake up and look out from our eleventh-floor apartment and feel a bit dejected by another day of dreary gray skies. But the repetition of gray made the blue spring days even better: part of the joy of spending the spring semester in Beijing was being able to feel the slow cycling from ice-covered canals to flowering trees, wintry wind to spring breeze filled with willow seed fluff.

Daily life was soothingly rhythmic, in a way less possible at Yale, considering our never-ending to-do lists and jagged schedules. Every morning I’d bike over to our classroom building within the Tsinghua campus (highly recommend getting a bike, you should be able to negotiate one at the campus shops for <200 RMB) and start classes for the day. During the two “semesters” – each lasting eight weeks – I took the classes 思想与社会 (Thought and Society), 古文 (Ancient Chinese), and 聚焦当代 (Focus on the Present Era). Thought and Society and Focus on the Present Era were ‘core’ classes, in which we were required to *mostly* memorize daily passages and learn about 20-25 characters per day. Ancient Chinese was a superb class in which I also had to memorize a short ancient passage each day and discuss it during class. The beauty of Ancient Chinese is in its efficiency – each character is packed with meaning, and many modern idioms, scholarly texts, and even street signs use sparse language inspired grammatically by Ancient Chinese (you’ll become much more familiar with subtle characters like 之, 其, 此, 皆, and more). I’d recommend trying to progress to electives like Ancient Chinese as soon as you’re able to, provided you have a solid foundation. If you have completed the 162/163 level at Yale, you should be able to place into Thought and Society, then progress into the elective classes sooner.

I’d have lunch in the dining halls – which have incredible variety for fantastic prices (<10 RMB per meal) – with friends from IUP. The students at IUP come from a variety of backgrounds – more than half had graduated from college (and were in graduate school or working), while the remaining were undergraduates. In the afternoons, at least from March onwards, I’d head over to 中关村, China’s “Silicon Valley,” which is conveniently located just about 15 minutes by bike southwest of Tsinghua’s campus. I’d spend the afternoons into the
evenings at an internship with 创新工场 (Sinovation Ventures), then head back to the apartment to do homework before bed.

Many of the most memorable moments in China came with the people I was lucky enough to get to know – mostly a wonderful mix of graduate and international students at Tsinghua. One thing that’s disadvantageous about IUP is that there are few directed opportunities to meet other people. Given the small class sizes (3 people or less per class) and the already somewhat structured friend groups coming into the spring, it can even be a small challenge to meet other IUP students. Since our classes are separate from those of other Tsinghua students, who are hyper-busy with their own lives, it’s difficult to get to know students at the university. To compound that, because the “fall” Tsinghua semester ends at the end of January, after which there is a lengthy break for Chinese New Year, the club fair only takes place at the end of February / start of March.

It all sounds like the situation doesn’t want you to win, but there are ways to beat the system and make friends! A few recommendations: go to the club fair at Zijing, near the undergraduate dorms, and spend some time talking to the different booths. Clubs can be a great way to get to know people – I personally joined street dance, elderly healthcare, and Zen clubs (though admittedly wasn’t super consistent about attending, especially towards the end of my time). Scan lots of QR codes – I came across several posters advertising soccer try-outs and met friends while kicking around. If there are things you enjoy doing back home (sports, art, music), there’s almost certainly a community of people at Tsinghua, or in Beijing more broadly, who also enjoy such activities. By playing piano in one of Tsinghua’s dorm basement practice rooms, I got to know a few other piano-hobbyists. Going to speaker events can be a hit or miss way to get to know people but is also definitely worth a shot. The Yale Center in Beijing (WeChat ID: YaleCenterBJ) frequently has events, as does Tsinghua’s campus, and if you sit next to people and strike up conversations, you’re bound to run into people curious about why a Yale student would spend time in Beijing.

To close off, perhaps some rough thoughts on a question that I’ve been asking myself: “how am I different after these five months?” It’s tricky to pinpoint areas of profound personal growth amidst the continued shortcomings. Yet there are undoubtedly new perspectives on the world that I’ve gained by spending time halfway across the globe, and by offering a few thoughts I hope that those considering IUP can see that it can be about so much more than language. I’ve had the space and experiences to think more about privilege and gratitude, my family’s difficult history, American power and hypocrisy, friendship and vulnerability, and moral obligations that clash with self-actualization.

I think that the experience of being an outsider can be an uncomfortable and immensely valuable one. As a Chinese-American who has spent all his life in the US, I was in the unique position to share the outward appearance of those around me in Beijing, as well as some of the family background, but also feel somewhat disconnected along axes of language and culture. There were moments in the workplace and during interviews when I felt the discouragement of
having ideas in my head but not having the language to express them, and times in social situations where I felt lost in the flurry of web-speak and cultural idioms. My empathy and respect for immigrants coming to the US and thriving (without many of the advantages I had in China) has only grown through my own experience of displacement. It’s only deepened my awe at my parents for their own journey in the United States, navigating an unfamiliar and lonely cultural landscape and still trying to shape a normal American childhood for their own children. One of the best pieces of advice I received before heading to China came from reading Marko Micic’s post about his time at IUP. I’ll include an excerpt from his post, but encourage people (especially Light Fellows who are about to embark) to go and read past posts for the invaluable advice they contain:

“Being in China on the Light Fellowship always has this air of ephemeralness. There’s this notion that there’s no point committing to things because you’re just not going to be around for long enough to see it grow into anything. But the truth is, living in China without committing into it is merely wasting a year abroad (or a summer, or fall or whatever). In the words of Max Payne from “Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne”: “Death is inevitable. Our fear of it makes us play safe, blocks out emotion. It’s a losing game. Without passion, you’re already dead.” Of course, there’s something to be said for carefully considering things before launching yourself into them, but resolving to not throw yourself into anything that might possibly extend beyond your time in China just because your time in China is limited is a recipe for a cruise-control-to-nowhere-very-slowly kind of lifestyle.”

In the end, your time in China will be short – throw caution to the wind, and just do it. Please feel free to get in touch at liutony66@yahoo.com if you’d like to chat.

The real work of making sense of my whole experience will be in the coming months and years, I’m sure. For now, I’m just immensely grateful to the existence and generosity of the Light Fellowship, and for all the staff that work to allow us to have these experiences. We are truly lucky to be students at a university which has such a unique program.

b. Peter Vanderslice; Spring 2019 Final Report

My final semester at IUP was a phenomenal experience both academically as well as outside of the classroom.

After 5 terms of IUP, I successfully passed the HSK level 6 exam and left feeling confident in my reading skills. This was an incredibly rewarding period in my year in China as I began to see the fruits of the time I spent studying at the program while also getting a sense as to how I plan to use my language skills going forward. That semester, I had the chance to take classical Chinese, 2 textbook courses as well as a class to prepare HSK 6 material. One of my biggest realizations was the importance of classical Chinese. While, I do not anticipate studying ancient literature in the future, I benefited greatly from taking the class and recommend it to anyone who takes Chinese at an L5+ level. IUP’s introduction to guwen gave me the opportunity to learn many key words that are used in literary Chinese that I often saw in the newspaper but
never fully grasped till taking the course. Additionally, IUP provided me with a great deal of assistance in studying for the HSK. Given that it is a universally accepted exam among employers in China, year or semester-long Light fellows might want to consider taking level 5 or 6.

Outside of class, I joined the Tsinghua University’s THOOD rap group. Hip hop culture is on the rise in China and after writing a rap song for a class project at IUP, I discovered that writing Chinese rap songs is very fun. Despite being at Tsinghua for a few months already, this was my first time making friends with and interacting with Chinese students my age. Getting the chance to co-write and perform a song with two Tsinghua undergraduates was a great opportunity to both enhance my language skills as well as get a great angle on contemporary Chinese youth and their musical interests. I strongly recommend getting involved with on-campus organizations as they are great social platforms for getting to know other Chinese students your age.

This organization also led to me trying out for “Rap of China” which, despite being unsuccessful, was one of the highlights of my time in Beijing. I also got the chance to film two more episodes on CCTV’s “Unlocking the History of Technology” where I joined a panel to discuss Thomas Edison and the history of electricity. Chinese speaking foreigners are often in demand by television shows and I think it’s an opportunity that's certainly worth seeking out for anybody who enjoys performing arts or public speaking. The preparation process for these shows was another engaging way for me to practice my Chinese.

IUP also acted as a springboard into my summer job working as an intern at Didi—the Chinese equivalent of Uber. My role was to help design features for the kuaiche (uber x equivalent) service in collaboration with Chinese engineers. The reading and listening skills I acquired at IUP were incredibly helpful as I read through customer service reports and reviewed drivers' complaints. Without studying at IUP, I would not have been able to add value as the only foreign intern on a team of 300 Chinese engineers.

Interning at Didi the summer after finishing the Light Fellowship also gave me an understanding as to how Chinese-speaking foreigners can live and work in China over the next few years. Companies like Alibaba, Didi, Mobike, Xiaomi, Huawei, and JD.com are all looking to expand to international markets and need Chinese speaking foreigners based out of Beijing to act as a liaison with markets abroad. Many students I encountered at masters programs such as Schwarzman and Yenching are increasingly joining in these functions and playing key roles to enable the international expansion of Chinese technology companies. Getting this exposure while I still have three years left at Yale was incredibly beneficial as it sparked my interest in startups and gave me a better sense of which resources I should seek out upon returning to campus. Having had the chance to apply the skills I learned at IUP, I also feel confident about returning to work in Beijing after graduating.

Being in China on the Light Fellowship for a year is beneficial not only in the sense that it is by far the most efficient and effective way to enhance one’s language skills but also because
it gives students a fully-funded opportunity to be in one of the most dynamic regions in the world. The language skills that I acquired during the Light Fellowship empowered me to live, work and network with people from a wide diversity of backgrounds. This is one of the greatest things I got from the fellowship as it enabled my love of China to mature from a general interest in the language and culture to a more profound interest in China’s future and how I see myself being a part of it.

Ultimately, my most important piece of advice to Light Fellows is to see the fellowship as not only an opportunity to learn language, but to get an incredibly rare perspective on modern Chinese society. Getting involved in the Yale Club of Beijing, university events as well as various groups organized by foreign expats will provide you a learning experience that will meaningfully complement the skills you learn in your language program. If you hope to use your Chinese in a business setting in the future, I would suggest looking mostly at language programs in Beijing or Shanghai. These cities are hubs for tech startups and will present you with the best opportunities to get an insider’s view on the remarkable innovation that is taking place in China today.

I would like to thank the Light Fellowship for providing me with this life-changing experience. I am incredibly privileged to have been able to spend a fully-funded year in Beijing at this point in my Yale career.

c. Alex Wang; Summer 2019 Final Report

**Academic**

The placement exam is one of the first things that you will do when you arrive at IUP. It consists of two parts: a written exam that tests you on listening, vocab, and reading comprehension, and an oral interview with the academic director and two teachers. During the interview they will ask you for your goals for the program which they will also consider when placing you into classes.

I was placed into two lower advanced level classes, one comprehensive class《聚焦当代》Talk of the Times and one listening/speaking class (广播 1). Talk of the Times covered a variety of topics in modern China, from social problems e.g. 户口制度 to media and entertainment (the lesson on 非诚勿扰 was quite well received). Radio 1 features snippets from a radio show called 《午间半小时》Half an Hour at Noon that was aired in the 90s. The show seems like a Chinese version of NPR, with some snippets featuring news (as news as news gets when it’s from the 90s) and others self-reflective narratives presented in first person. Talk of the Times had a 1-on-1 and a 3-on-1 section, while Radio 1 was two 3-on-1 classes.

**Housing**

Finding housing is perhaps the most uniquely challenging part of IUP. Before I arrived in Beijing, the program coordinator forwarded some emails with offers from students from the
previous term looking to sublet their apartments for the summer term. I was lucky to get an apartment in 华清嘉园, possibly the closest neighborhood to Tsinghua campus and right next to the Wudaokou subway station, rooming with 2 other IUP students.

Some classmates had a far more difficult time figuring out their housing options, having to deal with agents (who oftentimes don’t contribute anything to the apartment-finding process but still take a sizable agent fee), landlords (several students had the same landlady who would oftentimes show up at their apartment unannounced, was extremely hard to reach when they needed paperwork filled out, and stole one of their WeChat Moments pictures to use as her own profile picture), and uncooperative flatmates (one classmate’s would constantly smoke cigarettes inside the apartment despite repeated requests to stop). All in all, it’s much more of a real-world experience than other programs with dorm housing seem to offer, which I personally found valuable as a relatively sheltered undergrad.

For prospective students, I recommend finding housing in the Wudaokou area. It is full of stores and restaurants, is close (10 min bike ride, 20-30 min walk) to IUP, and is along the subway line 13 that makes the rest of the city accessible. The two neighborhoods with the best location are 华清嘉园 and 五道口嘉园, where the rent typically runs about 4000-5000 CNY per month. The buildings are relatively old and the rooms are drab, but they are where the most IUP students chose to live during my term.

Classmates

The student body of IUP is very different from other programs in that the majority of the students have already graduated from undergrad. The others are graduate students, working, or somewhere in between the two. Out of 30 something students in my term there were about 10 undergraduates, of which 3 total were from Yale and the others assorted US universities. Personally, I enjoyed having classmates who came from all different walks of life. I feel that at Yale the Yale bubble is very much real, and while the people on campus are diverse and amazing it remains that the age range is, by construction, quite narrow. I didn’t find the age gap to be much of a barrier to become friends, and I feel like I learned a lot from my older peers about language and life and work and love and everything else in between.

Extracurricular

A big criticism of IUP is that there are not enough structured activities with your fellow classmates. Since a lot of the students are older, the administration only hosted 1 optional field trip with us that less than a third of the students attended. This doesn’t mean that I didn’t get to know my fellow classmates though: through the group chat, get togethers on weekends were pretty frequent. It did result in a few awkward moments later on in the term where I would meet a classmate for the first time since they had not shown up to any of the same events that I went to.
Outside of IUP-related activities, there is plenty to do on your own (even in the summer). The Tsinghua school year doesn’t end until mid-July, so there are always plenty of people at the gym, on the basketball courts, and working in coffee shops. I enjoyed going to different study spaces (三教 and the Time Capsule café are nice places to start conversations) and basketball courts (there are major complexes by the student dorms and the gym) to meet friends, many of who would be responsible for some of my best memories from the summer.

Food

You won’t want to eat Yale food again after spending time in the Tsinghua dining halls. Meals are cheap (most go for under 10RMB), guaranteed to be sanitary (college dining halls are held to the highest food safety standards in China), and honestly better than most restaurants (besides the fast food).

Here is a map of all the Tsinghua dining halls. Campus is very big, so you might only have the chance to hit #7 听涛园 (which has extremely good Xi’an food in the back/northwest corner) and #9 清芬园 during the day, but I encourage you to head up towards the student dorms for #2 桃李园 and #1 紫荆园 if you get the chance. Here are a few dishes that I tried that were really good:
Stone pot beef bibimbap 牛肉石锅拌饭 (#2 first floor)
招牌牛肉面 (#9 first floor)
麻辣香锅 (I prefer the one on #9 first floor but the one at #7 also has noodles)

This one is more expensive (but still extremely cheap by US standards, around 30-60+ CNY depending on how much you get, so be sure you have enough money on your meal card before you go for it (you can also ask the workers to split the cost between you and your friends). Splitting these with friends on Fridays became a tradition for me. There is nothing like kicking off the weekend with some face numbing mala spice (you can also get these non-spicy and less spicy if you want).

Conclusions

I highly recommend IUP for any student looking for a flexible and independent experience in Beijing! I had a summer full of language, new friends, good food, and plenty of exploring the hutongs and parts of Beijing I’d never seen before. I’ll leave off with a last piece of advice for any prospective IUPers: IUP, like many other things, is like ordering a malaxiangguo in the Tsinghua dining halls---you get what you put in.

I’d like to thank the Light Fellowship for the opportunity to have this amazing experience this summer, and for my teachers at IUP for sticking with me as I struggled to express what I wanted to coherently. Feel free to reach out to me at alex.l.wang@gmail.com if you’d like to talk.