8. UVA in Shanghai

a. Guan Li, Summer 2018 Final Report

My summer in Shanghai was an unforgettable experience. I was able to improve my Chinese drastically and gain a whole new perspective on Chinese culture/society.

Academics

Overall, the courses were well structured and well taught. I was placed into the second level courses. Class started at 8 AM each day, Monday to Friday, and last until 11 AM, with 10 minutes breaks in between. The first class was a lecture, which consist of new grammar and vocabulary. The second class was a practice class where you learn how to use the new grammar and vocabulary, and the third class was an activity class where you apply the new grammar and vocabulary in a debate or interview situation. The afternoon class starts at either 1pm or 2pm and it changes depending on the week. This is the most useful class in my opinion because you get to talk to a TA one-on-one and work on your speaking skills. The TAs also help you learn how to incorporate the new vocabulary and grammar into your conversations. One thing I noticed is that the program focused on more characters instead of pinyin, which is different from Chinese L1/L2 at Yale.

Living situation/Roommate

Dorms were provided by the program. The program was based at East China Normal University and all the foreign students lived at the international student dorms. I shared a room with another person in the program. The bathrooms and showers were shared with the other floormates. Trash was taken out each morning and the cleaning service was every Tuesday. Overall, it was very comfortable. We had A/C and the rooms were big enough. The bathrooms and showers were always clean. Our classroom was 10 minutes away from our dorms, so it was very convenient. The dining hall was right outside our dorm. The food is pretty good and cheap. There are a few stores around the dorm where you can buy snacks and drinks. There are also a lot of really good restaurants right outside the school. If you want to go to a fancy restaurant, there is a huge mall right across from the school where you can eat all kinds of food.

Extracurricular activities

Whenever I had free time, I would either go play basketball right outside our dorm or go to the gym. There are also tennis courts, volleyball courts, a track, and a field next to our dorm. The program also offered a few classes where you can learn how to cook Chinese food, do
Chinese arts and crafts, and other activities related to Chinese culture. These classes cost extra money, but it could be something fun for you to do outside of class. On weekends, the program also organizes special trips for everyone to attend like going to the Shanghai museum and dragon boat festival. We also spent a weekend at Hangzhou and an entire week at Beijing/Xi’an. These trips enhanced my learning experience because I was able to learn more about Chinese culture and recognize things that the textbook talked about like the modern and ancient aspects of Beijing. One of my favorite things to do is going to the local market and bargaining with the store owners. This allowed me to apply what I learned in the classroom to real-life scenario and learn more about the business culture in China. Additionally, I was able to get some quality merchandise for a good price.

**Strengths or weaknesses of the program**

The main strength of this program lies in the teachers and the TAs. They put so much effort into their lessons each day to make it fun and interesting. They really care about your progress and they make sure you understand everything. They not only help you academically, but they will also help you with problems in your daily life like finding a movie theater or taking the subway. Their enthusiasm and excitement to teach each day encouraged me to continue learning and focus even when I felt really tired. I also liked that they graded all of your assignments immediately, so I was able to correct my mistakes before the next class and improve on the assignments for next week.

One weakness I noticed is that the program does not focus on pinyin as much as I would like. I feel like pinyin is important in helping students learn how to pronounce the characters with the right tone. Many students did not pronounce the words with the right tone and I feel like if pinyin was emphasized more, it would help students remember how a word should be pronounced. The exams are all based on knowing how to read and write characters and grammar structures. This was completely different from the way Chinese was taught at Yale because pinyin and correct pronunciations were heavily emphasized both in class and on examples.

**Reasons I chose the program and whether it met my expectations**

I chose to attend UVA in Shanghai over HBA because I felt like Shanghai and the program, in general, was a better fit for me. I also heard from previous students who attended this program that they had a great experience. Overall, this program met my expectations because my main goal was to improve my Chinese and explore Chinese culture/society and I felt like I was able to accomplish those goals through this program.

**Insights from time abroad**

Studying abroad is a great way to improve your language skill in a short amount of time and I think everyone should experience it once because you will learn things that are not taught in classrooms.
Advice for future Light Fellows

My main advice is to be prepared to spend most of your time studying the language and attending class. It will be exhausting because you will be learning a lot of material in a short amount of time but try to find time to relax and do things you like. Don’t be afraid to try new food and experience your culture. Always ask your teachers for help even when the problem is not related to class.

b.  Iyala Alai, Summer 2019 Final Report

Before embarking on the UVA in Shanghai course, my main priority was how I could use my time in China to push my language proficiency as far as I could in the space of my two months there. However, over the course of the program my priorities changed as I came to realise that I was gaining as much from my time outside of the classroom as I was in lessons. Being able to experience 4 Chinese cities (Hangzhou, Xian, Beijing and, of course, Shanghai) with the guidance of my Chinese teachers and peers and the comfort of knowing that my language was strong enough to help me get by and get the most out of my time there was probably the most fulfilling aspect of my summer.

Academics

The class structure at UVA in Shanghai is very different from what I was used to with Chinese classes at Yale, and in this respect I was taken slightly off-guard at the beginning of the program and initially found it difficult to keep up with the workload. We began with a lecture-style class at 8am, followed by drill class at 9 and an activity class at 10. There was a large emphasis on listening and repetition, particularly in the lecture and drill classes, which primarily involved repeating phrases that the teacher had prepared. I was not personally the biggest fan of this teaching style, as it didn’t give that many opportunities for us to think for ourselves and express our own understanding of the texts we studied. However, we also had daily one-on-one speaking lessons, which were a highlight of the academic program in my opinion. We would discuss the text and current affairs related to it, which allowed me to learn a lot about social phenomena and culture in China and compare it to situations in my home country. It also gave me the chance to use the vocab I had learned to express my own thoughts surrounding the material. It was really gratifying to be able to hold conversations about the economy, politics, art, film and so much more, all using Mandarin! These one-on-one sessions were a chance for me to reflect on how far my language skills had come at the end of the program.