

My name is Shaun Garrard and I'm an RMIT student studying International Studies. Between September 2015 and January 2016 I studied on exchange in China at Nanjing University. The time I spent studying at Nanjing University was the best time of my life and I cannot speak highly enough about both the university and Nanjing itself. Nanjing is an exciting, vibrant and fast-paced city and for those of you who have never been to China before, it's a perfect introduction to the country. It has both historic aspects of ancient China as well as modern, developed aspects of the "new China".

I'm just going to give a brief overview of some of the things I learned about life in China and provide you with some information I wish I had known before arriving in Nanjing.

The University

Nanjing University is situated right in the heart of the city. The campus is surrounded by heaps of great bars and restaurants (including two Australian bars just a short 10 minute walk away). Classes at the university will run from 8am till 12pm every week-day and the best thing about finishing class at lunch time is that all the students can head out in groups to eat together. This was my favourite aspect of life as a student in Nanjing.

The campus itself is beautiful and historic. Put some time aside to get lost exploring the old buildings, walkways and gardens. The campus is well kept, clean and peaceful. It's not difficult to meet local Chinese students and I highly recommend attending the weekly language swap events where foreign students can meet local Chinese students and practice speaking together. While having local friends is great for language learning, it's also valuable for learning about the city as they will be more than happy to show you around the best places that most tourists or foreign students wouldn't know about.

I have to make a note about the teachers at Nanjing University. Throughout my whole semester at NJU I didn't hear one student complain about their teachers. Within the first month, both my teachers had become part of the class and would treat us like their friends. There were even times when they would come out to karaoke bars and restaurants with all of the students. Sometimes they could become as bored as we were with the regular textbook work, and they would choose to liven up the classes and get the students interacting and having a good time. I had some classes that were filled with music, food, acting and sometimes even dancing! The teachers try to get all the students involved and it makes the experience of coming to class each week really rewarding.

Social and lifestyle

The city is packed with retail stores and BIG shopping centers. You'll quickly start to learn where you can get the cheapest stuff and where you'll be charged a little extra. Clothing and technology is generally more expensive in China than it is in Australia so don't expect to be able to go on crazy shopping sprees without breaking the bank. That being said, there are some hidden gems where you can find some really cool gear for reasonable prices.

Where you will save money in China is on food and drink. Eating out in Nanjing is unbelievably cheap and this is not an indication of poor quality as some of the cheapest restaurants are known for serving the best food. And coffee lovers, don't stress, there is a good café culture in Nanjing and a lot of places to grab a great cup of coffee. Just a 5 minute walk from the Institute for International

Students is Hankou Rd which is a strip of restaurants and cafés and a popular destination among NJU students. While you'll be hard pressed to find a good Chinese tea house in Nanjing, there are a lot of places that sell authentic Chinese tea that you can brew yourself at home.

Many students chose to set up a Chinese bank account when they arrived. I personally didn't do this so I can't provide details on how to do it, but from what I know from other students, it's a relatively easy process and no students had too many headaches trying to set one up. If you decide that you'd prefer to avoid the hassle then you can take comfort in the fact that the far majority of transactions in China are done using cash anyway, so having a Chinese card in the end isn't so useful.

In Nanjing the partying never stops. For any student that loves a good night out, they won't be disappointed. Friday and Saturday nights will usually start at the bars across from the campus where you can buy 10RMB pints of beer. From there, students can jump on a bus or in a taxi and head to one of the many clubs and bar streets that Nanjing has to offer. There were a few occasions where students even organised huge parties in the basement of the international student building so look out for those!

There are a lot of big events held in Nanjing on a regular basis so be sure to keep an ear out for what's happening. In my second month of study I took part in the Nanjing half-marathon. The event was really well organised and ran very smoothly. Around 20,000 people took part in the marathon. I also took part in was Jiangsu District's biggest electronic music festival which was another very successful event. Large-scale activities like there are common and well-advertised in Nanjing and there are plenty of special interest groups to follow on Wechat. Just start asking around when you arrive.

Finding an apartment

Most of the rooms on campus are automatically filled by the students who received scholarships for study, with a few left over for whoever comes first in, best dressed. I didn't get a scholarship for study in China and when I arrived in Nanjing four days before enrolment day, all the rooms in the student accommodation were already filled. Looking for my own apartment wasn't easy, and looking back on it now there are a few things I wish I had known before my arrival. I'm going to list them below some of the things you should start thinking about before your flight.

1. **First thing to know is that anyone looking to rent their own apartment in Nanjing (or anywhere else in China) has to go through an agency.** Everyone needs an agent to connect them with a landlord and sort out the legal side of things including payment and the writing and signing of the contracts. Different students had different experiences going through agencies and while some found the process easy and straight forward, others (including myself) found the process complicated, frustrating and stressful. This was only because I hadn't done enough prior research and I was totally unprepared going in. So think about these things I've listed below and start doing your own research into renting apartments in China.
2. **Have a look at www.hellonanjing.net** – It's a fantastic website to that contains heaps of information about the city. Check out the forums pages to get in touch with people looking for roommates. There's also a ton of information on various social groups, nightlife hotspots, hotels and hostels, tours and places to visit. They also have a Facebook page you should follow called Nanjing Expat.

3. **Try to arrive in Nanjing AT LEAST A WEEK before the enrolment day** to start looking for an apartment. I arrived 4 days before and assumed that I would be able to enrol at NJU and look for an apartment at the same time. Unfortunately the enrolment process isn't entirely straightforward either, and students often found themselves devoting entire days into ensuring that they were successfully enrolled. But I'll come back to enrolment later.
4. **You won't be able to secure an apartment before you arrive in Nanjing.** Don't worry, this isn't necessarily a bad thing but it was definitely daunting for me as I'm sure it was for many other students. Agencies will tell you that they will meet you as soon as you arrive but will never promise anything without first seeing your face and showing you around their apartments. Even if you find someone on hellonanjing.net who says they will be happy for you to move in with them, don't take their word for it. Finding a roommate is notoriously tricky in China and people will always choose whoever is prepared to move in on the closest date. So if someone says they'll hold a room for you for a week before you arrive and then they are contacted by someone who can move in tomorrow, they will likely give the apartment away to them instead. That being said, there will be plenty of foreigners looking for roommates when you arrive and contacting them can often be an easier and cheaper process than going through an agency (just make sure you have a Wechat account set up as this is how everyone prefers to be contacted). Just be sure that everything adds up on the contract. You will likely still need to pay a fee to the agent or landlord who owns that apartment even if they didn't help you secure it (I know, it's totally unfair, but there's no use arguing with them). The fee is usually half the price of a renting month.
5. **Prepare to pay in cash.** No foreign student has ever been able to pay for their apartment in Nanjing with a card (especially a foreign card) and you'll have to make quite a large withdrawal from the ATM's to pay for the apartment. It sounds horrible but it's actually a pretty fun experience building up a huge pile of 100 yuan notes to hand over to the agency.
6. **You will have to pay for the whole apartment in advance if you're staying for one semester.** For those staying for one year, you'll need to pay half when you move in and another half before second semester starts. Everyone also needs to register their new address at the local police station within 24 hours after moving in to the apartment. This is another good reason to arrive well before the enrolment date. But don't worry, the police stations are easy to find and the process isn't complicated.
7. **Don't assume that if you're not living on campus you're going to miss out on a lot of the social events.** That was not the case with any of the students I met who were living off campus. Everyone keeps in touch through Wechat and almost everyone ends up with the same timetable so it's super easy to coordinate social events. Most students will choose to live in Gulou district as this is most convenient area for students studying at NJU, so make this the first area you visit when looking for an apartment.
8. **Rent is CHEAP in Nanjing.** So don't go in there assuming you're going to break the bank. Before you arrive, have a look at some prices on hellonanjing.net to get an idea of how much you should be paying each month for an apartment.

Student Accommodation

If you were lucky enough to have secured a scholarship then you have a high chance of getting a room at the student accommodation. The whole building is dedicated solely to housing international students from NJU. The building is conveniently situated right next to the international student

building where all language students take their classes, so students can practically roll out of bed and into the classroom.

Those of my friends who were living in the dorms said that the rooms are comfortable, the location is convenient and the price is low. The only thing they had to complain about were the shared bathrooms and the occasional cold shower. The building itself is kept clean and, at least during my semester of study, the students are all generally well behaved enough not to cause a huge ruckus and cause disturbances.

Enrolment

Nanjing University's enrolment process is the only aspect of the university I have to complain about. While they may have learnt from their past mistakes, the system when I enrolled last year was poorly managed and confusing. This was mostly due to the fact that there were too few staff working on the days and there was no efficient method put in place of processing student enrolments. While the process is painful, there were no instances of student being enrolled incorrectly and problems arising as a cause of that. So rest assured that once you're in, you're in and there won't be any problems once you've worked out what you need to do. And remember that everyone is in the same boat and it's actually a great time to get to know people by sharing your frustration together.

All students have to take a test during enrolment week that will place them into a class designed for their level. If you completely botch the test on the day and find that you've been placed into a class that is too low for you, don't worry, there is plenty of freedom to move about classes during the first week until you find one that is right for you. Your initial ranking is by no means set in stone.

Once you're given your timetable you have to buy your textbooks which, luckily, is a painless process. You can buy all your books from the university library and they're very cheap.

Part-time work

If you're looking to earn a little bit of cash on the side, it's very easy to find a teaching or tutoring job that will pay a modest hourly rate. Many students take on some type of teaching position while studying at NJU. You likely won't even need to go out in search of a teaching positions, teachers and school staff will find you. Teaching positions are advertised everywhere at the university and you can often get in contact with the right people through word of mouth. Unfortunately, if you don't like teaching, there aren't a lot of other part time jobs available to foreigners in China (unless you're confident enough to try and find some translation work).

Getting around

If you're arriving at Nanjing Airport it's possible to get a bus that will take you in to the city center. But if you're anything like me, and are too scared to try and navigate the bus system on first arrival, you can take a taxi from the airport that will cost you about 100-150RMB depending on where you're living. Taxis are super cheap in Nanjing, so much so that you'll vow to never get a Melbourne taxi ever again. They're a popular form of transport even for a 3-5 minute journey and you will likely be using them all the time.

Nanjing's metro system is extremely cheap and convenient. The system covers most of the city and you're never waiting more than a couple of minutes for a train. You can buy a card that acts just like a Myki that is easy to top up when you need to. While it can get a little busy during rush hour, it's always a fun experience packing on to a crowded carriage with hundreds of other Chinese people all staring at you. Just a side note, if you think you'll stand out in China then you probably will and the staring is something you will have to get used to. In saying that, I never felt unsafe in Nanjing. I always felt very comfortable walking around by myself and was never threatened in any way during the 5 months I lived there. The locals are friendly and helpful and they really appreciate when foreigners try to test their Chinese language skills on them.

If you want to get out of Nanjing over the weekends then there are plenty of amazing cities close by including Suzhou and Shanghai which are both only a two hour train ride away if you catch the bullet train. Tickets are cheap, with a one-way ticket to Shanghai costing only 300-350RMB depending on the time of day you're travelling. Get familiar with Ctrip.com as this is the only website where you can book train and plane tickets within China that has an English language option and the option to pay using a foreign card.

Final Comment

If you'll be studying Chinese language in Nanjing, your language abilities will improve leaps and bounds if you put in the effort. It's easy to fall into the trap of speaking English all the time and it's important to actively seek out opportunities to use the language and make local friends. In my experience this wasn't difficult because the Chinese students all seemed so keen to meet foreign students and introduce them to Nanjing. There are also plenty language swap groups that meet on a weekly basis and they're always looking for new students to attend.

All in all, Nanjing is a fantastic place to live and study and your exchange trip will be no doubt be an invaluable experience. Nanjing University is a beautiful, historic point within an extraordinary city. You will meet some amazing people from all over the world and form friendships for life

If you'd like to pick my brains about anything else relating to Nanjing or China in general then feel free to email me at shaun.garrard1@gmail.com or add me on Wechat - SHAUNGARRARD