I applied to go on exchange to China because I was interested in the opportunity to live in a place rather than simply pass through as a backpacker. I wanted to take this opportunity to dig a little deeper and get more than a passing understanding of another, very different, culture and society. I was interested in participating in the Chinese classes but didn’t expect to really gain a working knowledge of such a complex language after only three months.

I was, and continue to be, fascinated by China. The giant of the east that has gone through an utter transformation in the last half a century and in turn has affected the rest of the world. After my time in China I can’t say that I understand what China is about, or could sum it up in a few snappy sentences. In hindsight to gain a comprehensive picture of China in a lifetime, let alone a university semester, is overly ambitious. I did gain some interesting insights though. For example, I was surprised at the middle class of Tianjin; I didn’t expect to see so many ipads on the buses and hard seat trains. Western companies desperate to break into the Chinese market have a significant presence and advertise widely. I found this an interesting counterpoint to the idea, in the west, that ‘everything is made in China’. Yet foreigners were still uncommon enough to make local residents curious and very courteous. Chinese people spoke to me of their pride about traditional Calligraphy, Kung Fu and Philosophy and also flocked to the malls stocked with European and American fashion. China is famous for its ancient history yet I also found it a very modern country, forward looking. I will always associate the sounds of construction with China. Especially when this includes regular firecrackers.

Before studying in China I wasn’t sure how to explore such a large country, both in population and landmass, in which English is not widely spoken. I am very glad to have had the basic Chinese that I learnt at Tianjin Normal University. However, now I feel confident that even with a little Mandarin China is accessible. I have had my eyes opened to the huge amounts of natural beauty and cultural diversity held within a country that is mostly mentioned for its manufacturing and economic growth. I feel my time in China has added a tangible, human aspect to my understanding of China gained from books and journal articles. I enjoyed my time in China and would like to return in the future.