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# Living in germany

## --from an exchange student's perspective

### Introduction

Germany, as the second most popular migration destination in the world, is also one of the most popular choice for Chinese students when it comes to study abroad. The advantages lie not only in the high quality of engineering studies and researches, comparatively lower cost, but also the international atmosphere. I am going to share my experiences of living in Germany and hope it will be helpful for students who are interested in studying abroad.

### My Arrival

On 10th September I arrived in the first stop of my long journey--Berlin, the city which I visited later again and fell in love with. My plane landed in Scheonefeld Airport, small, simple and a little bit shabby compared to the fancy Hongkong Airport from which I departed. It was already dark outside, and the deep blue sky seemed to be swallowed by grand clouds.



The damp Berlin streets were

scattered with people with colorful hair and pieced noses and ringed lips. I was quite surprised and a little bit scared at this, because punk and metal are never the mainstream music styles in China and such dressing style is described as typical bad students or outlaws. Of course, my worries are resolved after I befriended with a Russian girl with 4 tattoos and 6 piercings. The first night in Berlin wasn't that easy due to the rain and the huge luggage of mine. Some of the Berlin subway lines are quite old and poorly equipped, that is to say, there is no elevator available. It was nearly impossible to carry a twenty-kilogram luggage up and down those stairs for a small-figure girl as I am. There comes this Berliner, middle-age with very kind eyes, helped not only me but the other girls with the luggage. There are also other people saying welcome to us with big smiles. The friendliness and openness of the Berliners create this illusion that German people are open and easy-going; it turns out that this is just features for people in big cities. In general, the opening of my European adventure is pleasant and smooth.

### **Place to live--Studentenwohnheim**

First thing to do after my arrival in Chemnitz was to find my room in the dorm which I applied in May. It's a room in a seven-people WG, with the help of student buddy, it was not very hard to find.

In Germany, there are many different choice for living. Studentenwohnheim or dormitory is quite popular among students: the price is very satisfying for students; the exclusiveness of the residents provide safety and good chance of making friends.

Taking the dorms in Chemnitz as an example, there are basically three types of dorms: single room; two-people apartment; WG. Single room dorm provide space for sleeping and studying and of course solidity. However, you will have to share the bathroom and kitchen with many other people who live on the same floor. There are two types of two-people apartment: one with personal bathroom and one with a shared bathroom. Cooking area are shared in both cases. This kind of WG still provide much solidity. So far as I know, people do not really talk much with their neighbor on the other side. The third kind of dorm is exactly what I am living in--WG. WG is an apartment usually with shared living room, kitchen and bathrooms and several private rooms. Unlike the previous ones, there are more interactions between flatmates. Taking the WG I currently live in as an example, there are a German girl, two German boys, a Brazilian boy, a Chinese guy and a French girl. From time to time we have dinner party together. The French girl came the same time as I do, and we became good friends as time goes by. WG is really a nice choice for friends to gather together, either for parties or just to chill out. In addition, WG is better choice if cooking is one of your hobbies. Because the cooking facility in WG is more complete and by sharing plates and other cooking staff, you do not have to buy new ones, which is very beneficial for exchange or Erasmus students.

Of course, to find your own apartment outside campus is also a possibility. There are also these kind of apartments that requires the identity of students or researchers, and home-stay is also possible. There are many different ways of living, but it is always a better choice to decide beforehand and book in advance, because to find a

place to live sometimes at short notice can be difficult, especially in big cities.

### **Paperwork&Complex Office Hour**

After having settled down, there are a bunch of paperwork waiting in line. To register in the city with the renting contract; to activate bank account; to register in the university; to activate health insurance; to apply for permit of staying and prolong visa. This kind of paperwork can be quite exhausting because different office have different office hour and they require different documents as well. In a small city like Chemnitz, English is not that commonly used. As a result, getting all those paperwork down is even more difficult. Now I developed this new habit of checking office hour and plan ahead. The word “schedule” has never been as frequently used as it is now.

I find it really hard to label Germans from the comparison of being hard-working and lazy. On the one hand, they have classes start from seven thirty, when it is totally dark outside in winter and which is globally regarded as ungodly hour. There is one time I needed to catch a early train, so I was out on a bus at six forty, and I was astonished to see so many people in city center, ready for work or other plans. On the other hand, every office has their own special office hour, and they will in no case be working beyond these hours. Some of them are only open two hours a week, and on Sundays German shops will be open, which took me quite some time to get used to.

### **Intensive DaF course**

Before the semester formally started, I took part in an intensive German course

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which last fifteen days. It was four hours every weekday as a row with twenty minutes break in between. I was taking A2 course, and it was taught in German only, which I found really helpful. In addition, taking the course is very good chance of meeting new friends as well. Almost all the students taking this course were Erasmus students, so basically we were facing the same situation.

### **Immatrikulationsfeier**

The winter semester starts from the first of October, and I was glad that I took part in this immatrikulationsfeier.



Immatrikulationsfeier is the German word for celebration of new school year. I was there with some Erasmus friend. Even though we were having difficulty understanding the German speeches, we still enjoyed the shows performed by

students. The bicycle show and the short concert were very impressive.

After the ceremony, we went for a round tour in the hall, where we got special gift bag from the university. What interested me most was the bottle of beer, to which I would comment as very German style. The other brochures were fairly informative



as well, providing recommendations for places to visit and local past-times.

## Studentenplan

The most important thing after the semester begins, I would say, is to make Studentenplan, or in other words, curricular plan. To choose course in Germany is not as simple as in China. First you need to find the introduction of course on the school website and then decide which ones interest you. For exchange students like me, there are certain requirements and recommendations. However, in order to gain equivalent credits as in my home university, I need to take some business courses as well. The problem is that there are not so many business courses in English. The acknowledge of the course “leadership” is because one of my friend invited me. Such course for

master students are not easy to find on the website. After that, you have to go to the class and sign up for the course on the list of the teacher. Only in that case, you are officially taking the class.

Yet choosing the course is comparatively more flexible as well. When it comes to choosing language courses, it's often the case that in opal system all the spots are taken but not all the students will really show up in class. As a result, even if you do not successfully get a spot on the website, you can still just go to the class in the first two weeks and sign up there. A phenomenon I do not understand is that there are so many people signing up for courses that they do not really attend.

In addition to academic courses, I took two sport courses as well. Both are karate but with different trainers. The course is taught totally in German, I can not really understand what the trainer is talking about. However it is sports course, and it's always safe to just do what the trainer demonstrates.

## **Vorlesung, Seminar, Übung, Tutorial**

In Germany, there are basically four types of classes. Vorlesung, or lecture in English, is always arranged in large classrooms. In Vorlesung, the professor will explain concepts and introduce researches while students' side remains relatively quiet. That leads to the result that Vorlesung is the most likely type of class that students will skip. However, of course it depends on the specific situation. Vorlesung at seven thirty in the morning for example, is just such a challenge for the students.

Seminars and Übung are a little bit similar: both requires more interaction between students and teachers, while seminars provide more explanations to concepts while there are more exercises to handle and discuss in Übungen. I personally like seminars very much. Sometimes there are quite inspiring questions for discussion.

Tutorial is the kind of class that does not really exist in China, which turns out to be of great use. Tutorial goes often with a lecture, providing clarifications of concepts and specific exercises of application. I did not really understand what Tutorial would be like, so I did not show up there until the last weeks.

### **German Students v.s. Chinese Students**

The one thing I would say about German students is that they are quite organized. Although procrastination is the global feature of university students, the Germans seem to be always aware of the deadline and make plans accordingly. I took Leadership seminar in the past semester, the form of this seminar is to have group presentation of one and a half hour for each class with discussions in between. Therefore, it is students rather than teachers who are dominate the class, and I have to admit that I'm surprised by the creativeness and fluency of German students' presentation. Instead of relying on the text like what I did, the Germans are quite aware of the content of their speech and are more than willing to involve the audience into discussion, which is quite the contrary of what they behave in parties. It is easy to tell that those are well-prepared presentations, accomplished by one or two weeks of discussion and material searching.



Another thing I would say about German students is that they feel fairly relaxed in class. Probably due to the traditional Chinese idea of teacher-student relationship--- the teacher is somehow the authority in class while the students are supposed to respect the teacher and obey, the classes in China are relatively quiet, especially in middle schools. In Germany, however, students are respected to ask questions. There is no need to stand up and raise your hand and students feel free to give a signal to the teacher and put up their questions or ideas.

### **Parties& Friends from a Language Learners Perspective**

Language learning is never restricted in class. A great part of my learning English and German here is to talk with my friends. Most of the friends I made here are from the Erasmus circle, where English is generally regarded as the “official language.” Being a students of English major, I feel quite free to express my idea and feeling using English. However, I do feel that now I do not have to refer to Chinese as to organize my sentences, which I used to do from time to time. In China, I did not really speak German very often, or let’s say not at all after class. Somehow here in Germany, I have a really good Czech friend, who does not speak English at all, so I have to speak German with him. Despite the language difference, we have so many things in common. At first, I had to refer to the dictionary all the time, but now I can talk normally to him. Unlike Chinese, German and English have relatively more consistency between their writing system and speaking system, so it is really helpful to talk and put all the grammar into practical use.

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## **Trips**

One thing I like very much being a student in Germany is that students can travel for free within the state. Since my staying here, I have been traveling a lot with this benefit. The first trip I went on with my friends is to Sachsenische Schweiz park. It was about two hours by train, and we were basically walking after that. Yet I found this kind of outdoor activities quite interesting, because you can enjoy the beautiful view and exercise and talk to friends at the same time.



One difference between traveling in China and traveling in Europe is that in many cities you do not need any other transportation as long as you get to the train station, which is almost impossible in China. Small cities like Weimar, Meissen, Pirna are so beautiful and perfect for visiting on foot.

## **Bergparade**

On 28th November, Chemnitz was freezing cold. Growing up in the south part of china, I am still quite amazed by how frequent it snows here in Germany and still can not help being like a child in this pure snow magic. Whereas the problem lies subtropical residents like me do not really know how to dress in real German winter. I remember shortly after the first snow fall in Chemnitz, I went out shopping for winter clothes. Happily returned, I showed my German roommate the outcome of hours of browsing, trying and comparing. She laughed and pointed out that what I called winter clothes were designed only for the autumn of Germany. Anyway, on the day of Bergparade I made the wrong choice of dressing. At first, it was still bearable, but I did not expect the long time outside waiting. After being half an hour outside, I felt that the snow magic no long worked on me. The wind cut through the bare skin and went into every pore of mine while the snow kept falling and making the road humid and slippery which made it even harder to walk on. After more than an hour of waiting, finally the parade began. Bergparade or the Miners' Parade in English, originated in the Saxon Ore Mountains, and Chemnitz is the first stop of it.

It was very nice to see the parade with all the participants dressed up, yet it was too cold to enjoy the whole show. Hence I left early with two other Chinese people and went to an Asia restaurant. It is more than pleasant to have a bowl of warm soup noodle for people suffering from freezing weather.

## **Cooking Party& Girls' Night**

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The most unforgettable part of my five months' staying here is maybe the girls' night. Originally it was just me inviting my friends to cook together and chill out. My French roommate love the idea of cooking together and chat, so we invited more girls over and then gradually we had certain group of girls. The time is gradually fixed at 19:00 on Sundays while the place changes every week. It became a certain ritual, a fixed part of my life here. Every Sunday we will cook something different and then enjoyed the food from across the world together. Sometimes when I comes to somebody's birthday, we will bake a cake and celebrate it together.



After the dinner, we will usually a cozy tea party, chatting or playing some games. These girls are such wonderful people! I always feel so relaxed with them and it is so good to know their countries through their point of vies. Last week we had our

last girls' night because most of them are leaving (or have left.) I like it so much because it makes me feel that although we are from different countries, such different cultural background, yet we understand each other and have so many things in common.

## **Christmas Party**

For the Christmas party, I joined in the singing group and present Christmas songs of different languages on the event. Before the party really took place, I had no idea what it was going to be like. Visiting CDK for parties are not something new for me, but the other parties I visited, even with a cultural theme, are mostly consist of drinking alcohol, loud disco music and dancing with friends. Judging from the arrangement for the Christmas party, it would not be something like this, hence I was really curious about what it would be like. Being part of the singing group, I was surprised to learn the great amount of Christmas songs. They can really keep going for the whole night without repeating. In addition, I also enjoyed to find out how a song was interpreted in different ways due to language differences. My favorite Christmas song among all is O Tannenbaum. Both of the lyrics and the tunes are beautiful. In December, I went to Berlin for weekend. Standing under a pretty shining Christmas tree near Brandenburger Tor, I sang naturally the song O Tannebaum, my roommate was surprised to hear that, and sang me the french version of this song. Later in December, I went to Stockholm, and there was this beautiful huge Christmas tree near the river. I could not help singing the song again, but I could not remember the whole lyrics, so I hummed some part. As

I was humming, I heard a lady joined in with fluent German. It was such a surprising encounter due to a beautiful song. This senior lady was traveling in Sweden with her husband, and was very happy to hear this German song being sung. She gave my friend and me encouragement in learning German and waved goodbye. This is unexpected bonus from joining in the singing group.

The Christmas party in general is very cozy and informational. The food that night was very enjoyable, especially the Knödel and the cookies. Speaking of cookies, it is in Germany that I learned baking. The meal in Germany may lack creativity and is limited in choice, however, the desserts are the other way around. After dinner, we sat around, light glowing dimly, and enjoyed the Christmas stories read by Tracy. We sang another round in between the story reading session and the secret Santa game, during which I was a little bit disappointed because somehow my name was not on the list. Seeing everybody else get a gift, I felt quite left out. Perhaps noticing my low spirits, Xueming and Shiyong approached me and gave me a well-packed gift which was for someone else who did not show up. This considerate gesture really lit up my night. My Christmas Eve was finally fulfilled.

### **New Year's Eve in Germany**

I celebrated the new year eve with my roommates and some friends of mine by having a fondue party. Before that, I rushed all the way back from the very north of the earth Abisko, through Stockholm, Copenhagen, Hamburg with trains, a ship and a bus. Because the direct train from Copenhagen to Hamburg was canceled

and we had to take the plan B provided by the train station. We got lucky that there was a bus heading Leipzig at midnight just when we arrived in Hamburg. When we finally arrived in Chemnitz at eight o'clock in the morning on 31<sup>st</sup> December, we felt home. This was really strange, because before the journey we were just joking about Chemnitz which was far from awesome; before this journey, we were making plans to all those cool places and getting out of Chemnitz. Yet now we felt so lucky and safe to be back. It was so hard and tiring to get back, which made the fondue party even more precious.

Fondue is a little bit like the French equivalent of Hotpot, yet oil replaces soup and with a lot of Cheese to serve. My German roommate prepared a special German game. There were lead of different shapes and each of us could choose one and melt it down to it was liquid, and then drop it into the cold water. The lead would instantly cool down and form into a new solid shape and the fortune of the new year could be told by comparing it with the shape provide on the cover of the game box. I got a "snake" shape, which indicated that I would be a lot of the time on the road in the coming year. However, this game is maybe only popular in the east part of Germany and some other surrounding countries like Czech Republic. After the dinner and countdown we went out for fireworks. In big cities of China, such fireworks are banned while here in Chemnitz, people can just feel free to enjoy as much fun as they wish from the firework. However, with the effect of alcohol, it could be quite dangerous as well.

I find it very nice that Europeans spend the Christmas Eve with their family while for New Year Eve they are usually with friends. With only five days in between and

you can always be around of your beloved ones.

## **Chinese Evening**

On the eighth of February is the Chinese lunar new year, yet I was here in Germany. This is the first time in twenty years that I did not celebrate it with my family. Nevertheless, we organized a cozy Chinese Evening on the second of February with the theme of Chinese New Year. This year in Germany, I celebrated it with all my friends.

For the organizing of Chinese Evening, I was in decoration group. I found it very interesting to learn making Chinese Lucky Knot and Papercutting. Even when I was in China, I had never done that before. Every year when the New Year season came, we would just buy such decoration on the market. I made extra Knots for friends and they loved them! It is very nice to find such cultural identity.

The evening began with a Chinese song Molihua sung by both Chinese students and international Students with English explanation in between. Over the other side at the bar, people were making traditional Chinese New Year food – dumplings. I invited some of my Erasmus friends over as well, and they were delighted to learn using chopsticks and making dumplings. I love the game of Chinese idioms very much, but it was quite difficult itself and it was even harder when you had to consider the range of ambiguity due to foreign accents. The singing and dancing part was actually a spur-of-the-moment decision. They got the pretty Chinese fans, and decided that it would be such a waste not to use it in dancing. Hence, they prepared the show during the game time and it turned out to be quite a hit. During the night, there were some really good



videos introducing different aspects of China, some of which even I did not really know.

The Chinese Evening maybe was the earliest party ever in CDK.

## **Learning German in Germany compared with in China**

I started to learn German in my first year of university as my third foreign language. In China, German was told in Chinese and it was more about reading and writing. It was not until the forth semester of my learning German that I had oral German class, and it was taught by Chinese teachers as well. Even though we tried to speak only German in class, but it did not really work. I felt like I learned a lot, but I did not know how to put them together into real life conversation. Although there were German students on campus, my German was just too bad to even make a conversation.

Here in Chemnitz, however, the German classes even only A2 level are taught only in German by basically native speakers. In addition, the German environment provide me the chance to apply the things I just leaned instantly because I am speaking German on a daily basis. I can feel the progress of my German level.

## **Learning English in Germany compared with in China**

Since ten year old have I started to learn English, but in the first three years, almost no one that I knew of took it seriously. In school we learned basic grammar while listening and writing were also of great importance. Nevertheless, speaking was

always the part being neglected. Many of my friends could get high grades in exams where oral test was off the case, however they can barely chat in English.

From primary school to high school, and in different regions, there are difference regarding the preference of British or American English. I basically learned the mixture of both. It was not until in university, where I took English as my focus of study that I was told to distinguish the difference between British English and American one. I have been paying attention to my pronunciation and speaking skills since middle school. However for many classmates of mine, it was another situation. As a result, some of them were really having a hard time adjusting their pronunciations in the first year of study. For oral English class in my university, every teacher, native speaker, has an office hour every week, which is more like “talking in English and practicing oral skills” hour. In addition to studying in class, I worked as an assistant for American teachers for my sophomore year in order to practice my oral English, and it was really helpful in picking up local way of speaking.

Here in Chemnitz, I only chose one English class which was Whirtschaftssprache english, or business English. It was more about adjusting the use of language to a more polite and formal way than teaching the usage of this language. However, judging from the performance of my German freshman classmates, I think English is taught quite well in Germany. Some of them indeed have quite strong German accent, but they barely make grammar mistakes such as Chinese students messing up with he and she, and they are really good at making the structure of the sentences flexible.

Almost all my courses here are taught in English, which I found fairly helpful in taking my English to a higher level. In addition, as I mentioned before, there are more chances to put languages into practice, allowing me to really using the language while thinking in its pattern without translating or interpreting.

## **Exams**

The first thing I noticed about exams in Germany is that students have to sign up for them or they will not be able to attend. In China, everything is arranged and groups of classes are considered together instead of individuals. In general, the exam period of Germany lasts longer than in China. In most cases, students will finish all the major exams in a week in China and it is very common to have two exams on a single day. In Germany however, exams are scattered in half a month or even longer and the same exam can take place in different time. In addition, the atmosphere of exams, as I feel, are much more relaxing in Germany than in China. Some of the examiners will just come around and encourage you with the exam. Of course, I can not jump to the conclusion of all the German exams are relaxing, but so far, I feel this way. In China, exams are really serious and everybody wears serious exam face.

In addition, the calculation of points is different as well. In Chinese University, the highest point is five, with an accuracy of two decimal points. In Germany, however, the grading scale is the other way around. One point zero is the highest grade and with only 1.3 and 1.7 in between 1.0 and 2.0. I remember there is one widespread story in China that saying that even though Einstein is so bad at Maths, he

is such an amazing scientist to encourage students not to lose their faith of participating in science. Yet the judge of Einstein being bad at Maths is that he got one point in Maths exam. It was not until I learned German did I know it was just a stupid story.

### **Germans--The Tough Crowd**

German people, which are usually known as the tough crowd, are as truly hard to be friends with as they are described. After my five months' stay, there is only two German guys that I would call friend. The Germans, as my German friends described, regard friendship as something that endures years of going through things together. It is very common that you meet a German and talk happily during party while after that you two are back basically to strangers or just Hi&Bye friends. As a Chinese of which nation is famous for being shy and conservative, I think I just found the European competitive nation in being withdrawn. The Germans, in my opinion, are very nice and organized yet really hard to hang out with.