

Rhianna Ilube (PPS) - Live, Learn and Intern in China, Hong Kong and Shanghai, Summer 2014

This summer, I spent 9 weeks abroad as a participant on the 'LLIC' (Live, Learn and Intern in China) Programme. LLIC is a vibrant cultural-exchange programme sponsored by the University of Hong Kong and The Victor and William Foundation. I spent the first 2 weeks at the University of Hong Kong, living in shared dorms and attending daily lectures on Chinese economics, business and society. The last 7 weeks was spent in Shanghai, where I worked as an intern for MindSpan Development, an executive coaching company based in Pudong.

I decided to apply to LLIC because I wanted to do something completely different after a hard year of studying politics at Cambridge. I wanted to make new friends, step out of my comfort zone and live independently for a few months. I'm glad I decided to apply, as I will never forget my experience of living in



China. The programme brought together many students from across the world - from America, India, Korea, Japan and many more countries. We all lived together in a hotel but were placed into different companies during the day. The opportunity to develop very close friendships with such a diverse group of people was definitely the best aspect of my time abroad. My roommate was Korean and I learned so much from her about Korean culture, politics and food. We lived in the centre of Shanghai, 5 minutes away from the Bund and the bustling city centre, replete with hundreds of restaurants, night-clubs and dark, traditional alleyways.

My internship was interesting, to say the least. MindSpan is a very small company (Gary Wang, CEO and 8 other employees) located in a wealthy district of Shanghai. The company was founded in 2006 and is now one of the biggest executive coaching networks in Asia Pacific. Initially, I was surprised by MindSpan's working culture. From the website, I was expecting a large, very corporate, organization. I was pleasantly surprised to find that it was much smaller than I had expected, complete with an informal and relaxed start-up atmosphere. The office was located in an apartment block - there was a small kitchen, a dining table, a sofa and a large meeting room overlooking Pudong. There was definitely a 'family' atmosphere in the office - the women who work for Gary all seem very close and comfortable with each other.

I really liked the staff at MindSpan. The women (all from China) were friendly, welcoming, chatty and very kind to us. Everyday they brought us fruit, which was much appreciated. We spent many hours talking to them, helping them with their English and discussing many cultural issues. We taught them about Britain and Hong Kong, and they taught us more about China and Chinese lifestyles. They gave us a few Chinese lessons. Only two of the 6 women working at MindSpan spoke English fluently - I didn't get to know the other women very well as their English was very limited and I can't speak Mandarin. However, they were keen to learn English and I enjoy teaching. My favourite memory was our final lunch together. We went to a nearby Anhui restaurant and Gary ordered so much delicious food for everyone.

However, my work at the company was often quite mundane and monotonous. For an entire month, we were expected to search on LinkedIn for coaches to contact and recruit. This task was extremely repetitive - we stared at a screen each day for 7 hours, scrolling through LinkedIn profiles and adding names to an excel sheet. Some days, we didn't have much to do and I felt as though I was losing countless hours of my summer holidays sitting in the office, working towards a project I didn't particularly care for.



Despite not enjoying my daytime internship so much, I really looked forward to the evenings and the weekends. I loved having the chance to independently explore Shanghai, which is a brilliant city. Of course, it took a few weeks to adjust to the Shanghai lifestyle. I got ill, homesick and not speaking Mandarin here was a real disadvantage. Linguistic barriers make a city appear unwelcoming and distant. I found myself relying on the native-Mandarin speakers in the LLIC group to get around Shanghai. I was also influenced by some of the other students who constantly complained about China/Chinese service/standards of hygiene etc.

Changing my attitude and my outlook definitely improved my experience of China. My phone was stolen. This was a bad thing at first, but it actually made me a lot more independent and free from distractions. The metro is easy to use and a good way to explore the city. We went on multiple weekend trips - e.g. sunbathing on the beach in Hong Kong, hiking up the Yellow Mountains in Hangzhou and visiting Zhoujiajiaou, a water village in Shanghai. Within the city, I really enjoyed visiting the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum, the Propaganda Poster Art museum and going to a huge vintage market, which was held in celebration of Chinese Valentines Day.



After 7 weeks in Shanghai, we flew back to Hong Kong for a closing ceremony. On our final night together, we went to the rooftop of the IFC mall, which has beautiful panoramic views of the Hong Kong skyline. We sat together for hours, listening to music, talking, and reminiscing on the last 2 months. It was a perfect way to end. My time in China had highs and lows, but overall, I am so glad I went. I now have friends all over the world and my eyes have been opened to a completely different culture. Thank you Pembroke College, The Victor and William Fung Foundation and Hong Kong University for the opportunity!