

Fulfilling My Lifelong Dream of Visiting China

By Oliver Barber

On the morning after Independence Day celebrations, I boarded my flight from Seattle to Shanghai and bade farewell to the Western world. The flight was an ecstatic relief. I had spent months of preparation: visas, packing, medical forms and applications, and it was finally time to head off to Shanghai for a month-long language and culture study program. I had no idea what to expect, but was wildly excited about what was coming. It felt like a part of me had been waiting to study in China my whole life. I have been interested in Sinology ever since elementary school, when I read a book about the Great Wall.

The 24 hours after landing were surreal. I was jetlagged, so it was like I was a piece of seaweed being dragged through the tide. But there was also a euphoria caused by being in a beautiful new country, surrounded by incredible new people. On that first day, I never knew what was happening more than an hour in advance.

On the bus ride to our accommodations for the first night, I talked with Viljar Rey, a Norwegian from Oslo, and Wu Yuxing (吴侯兴), coming from Philadelphia but originally from Fuzhou in Fujian province. Yuxing immediately approached me after getting past customs. He told me to call him Lao Wu (meaning good old Wu; Lao is a prefix for a good friend). Lao Wu ecstatically pointed out landmarks and facts about China as we gazed out the windows for the entire bus ride: how postal vehicles get priority, how they are always digging up roads because the electrical and water companies have no coordination. Being less familiar, Viljar and I listened intently. We also compared how school in Norway

was different from the U.S.

The Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) organized the program. CIEE has operated since the end of World War II, with the original goal of promoting peace through international education. About 120 CIEE students attended my session, but East China Normal University in Shanghai, where our program was held, hosts thousands of international students.

The next day, we toured the campus, where we were given student ID cards loaded with 1,000 yuan (\$145) for food and convenience store purchases and transit passes. At the end of the day, it was time to go to our host families for a month-long stay.

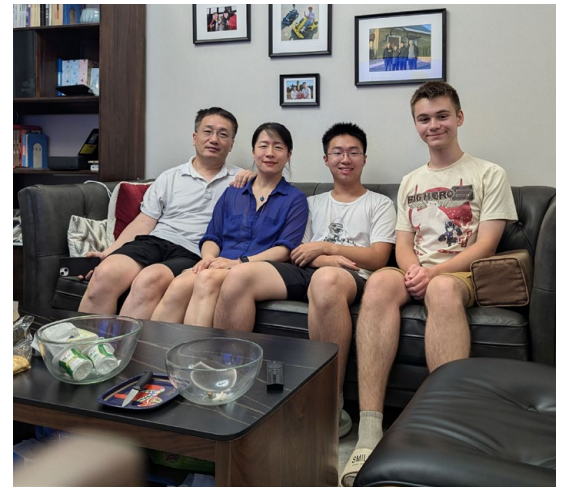
But as we waited for our host families, news from back home caused screams of joy to fill the auditorium. Our AP scores had just been released online. My program director asked me what was happening, and I explained. She immediately understood and said that we had every right to be excited. I was the last to be picked up, and most of the staff had already left by that time, so I had to wait in a nearby bookstore.

My Host Family

My host father was Xu Bo (徐波), a technician at China Mobile, one of China's largest internet and cell carriers. My host mother was Yin Jing (殷静), an accountant for a software company, and my host brother was their 17-year-old son, Xu Yue (徐钺). They live on the third floor of a high-rise in a densely populated area, in the Putuo District.

I vividly remember the first night. When I arrived at their apartment, I unpacked, and my host mom started cooking dinner. Xu Yue showed me around the apartment and described his time on a two-week school trip to Australia. We talked about our favorite music. Xu Yue is a dedicated Swiftie, or Taylor Swift fan. He was curious and always had some random questions to ask me.

When my host dad got home from work, he kept asking me if I wanted this food or that food. Watermelon, yogurt, nuts, lychees. They seemed to be always



Oliver Barber and his host family.

eating. We went to the police station to register my residence, and I forgot to take off my inside shoes (the Chinese have separate sandals for wearing inside living spaces). At first, I was a bit awkward and often couldn't find the right words, but we eventually got past the cultural barrier. I appreciate how kind and patient they were. We conversed in both English and Chinese, about equally, switching whenever we couldn't understand each other.

My daily routine was comfortable. I didn't have much homework, and I had lots of time for leisure with my friends and host family. Every day I woke up at 7 o'clock. Sometimes we would have breakfast items like Costco muffins at home, but other days my host mom and brother would take me to eat at locally owned shops that sold fried bread, tofu and soup, or to KFC. Having lived in a more rural area, I wasn't used to having time to go to a restaurant or a shop before school.

After that, we would go back home, I would pack my backpack for the day, and set off on my 15-minute walk to the university before class started at 9. I lived very close to the campus, and didn't need public transit.

We attended Chinese language class until 11:30 a.m. There were many classes; I was in 2C (level 2 group C) with Wang Laoshi (Teacher Wang)(王老师). Wang Laoshi was an aspiring teacher working on her degree in International Chinese Language Education. At 11:30, we were free to eat lunch at a local restaurant or one of the campus canteens. My friends

Editor: Oliver Barber, a high school junior from Maple Valley, Washington, participated in a Chinese language and culture program last summer at East China Normal University in Shanghai. Oliver has studied Chinese at school since seventh grade and online with Winny Lin, of USCPFA's South Bay chapter. He was one of Lin's students who demonstrated their Chinese language ability at the 2024 Washington Seminar. USCPFA helped sponsor his trip to China.

and I usually ate at one of the canteens. Some of my usuals included two pork buns for only 1.70 yuan (24 cents), fried rice, and then ice cream for dessert.

Conducting Interviews

Our classes only had CIEE students. The professors and teachers were student teachers from China. Most of them were finishing a degree in international education. However, we did interact with Chinese university students because, after lunch each day, we had to interview a random person on campus and take a selfie with them for proof.

The interviews always had to do with what we learned in class that day. For example, when we learned about terms related to cuisine, we had to ask what the person thought the difference between Chinese and American food was, and whether they thought American food is healthy. Interestingly, most people thought American food is healthy. Other interview topics included museum recommendations, cultural details and Chinese art. We also played games to see if they remembered facts we told them.

Sometimes students asked about the U.S. and why we were in China, but no one ever expressed negative opinions about the U.S. A few times, people stopped me on the street to take a selfie with me.

We had to meet at the buses by 1:30 p.m. to go to our cultural activities, which included visits to the Shanghai Urban Planning Museum and other museums, learning about Chinese medicine and learning Chinese dance. We also visited historical and religious sites in nearby Wuxi. We would usually get back by 4 o'clock, then the rest of the day would be free time until curfew at 7 p.m., when we had to be back with our host families.

I was usually the first to get back to the apartment, which used facial recognition for access control. It didn't register my face at first, so I used a keycard, but it randomly started working a few days later. I would take a shower before doing homework. This was a new routine for me as I was used to taking showers before bed, but it was so hot (90–100 degrees Fahrenheit) that cold showers were a necessity in midday.

After my entire host family was back from school or work, we would eat dinner. We ate out about half of the time. After dinner, we usually watched a movie. My



Oliver Barber and his friend Kingsley try on traditional Chinese clothing in Wuxi.

host family members were avid cinephiles and knew many actors and films, including American ones. They let me choose sometimes.

Enjoying Free Time

Fridays were special because we would finish our weekly unit with a presentation, then be free of stress for the weekend, and we had lots of extra free time because there was no cultural activity.

My friend Kingsley Zhuo (卓欧扬) and I felt freer than ever; we had many adventures on Friday afternoons. One time we went to the zoo. The monsoon rains discharged oceans onto us. Our hair and clothes were soaked, and our glasses were so streaked we could barely see, but it didn't matter. It was warm out, and we had no obligations. Everything felt new and exciting. Nothing could take away the fun.

Our next Friday afternoon included going to the Bund and Pudong District to look at the skyline and explore. The next week we visited the Jingan Temple, one of the largest Buddhist temples in Shanghai. Praying in Buddhism involves kneeling, then bowing three times and pressing your palms to the mat each time (Kingsley was quick to correct my technique). We also went to a mall called Global Harbor.

On our final Thursday, we went on a river cruise along the Bund with a few of our teachers and classmates. The route gave us a beautiful view of the modern skyline on the east side of the Huangpu River and the classical European architecture on the west side. A group of maritime police officers gave me cookies and welcomed me to China.

It started pouring rain during the end of the boat ride and by the time the cruise was over the streets were flooded. I'd never seen anything like it in person. Cars looked like boats, and scooters like jet skis.

Our program leader, Jin Laoshi (Teacher Jin) (金老师), was in charge of taking care of us in class 2C whenever we weren't in the classroom. She did curfew checks and chaperoned us during excursions. She took me to the hospital when I had dry skin on my hands. She even allowed me and my friends to sing karaoke during the staff party. Much of the positive experience was thanks to her, and we were all grateful for how much she cared about our well-being.

Americans Bad at Basketball?

During my stay, there were humorous cross-cultural experiences. I played basketball with my host brother and some local kids, but I'm not good at that sport. This resulted in one of them asking if all Americans were bad at basketball.

Another time, I was given a cup of water but almost spit it out because I didn't expect it to be hot (Chinese regularly drink hot water).

I also enjoyed the English translations on some public signs, such as "freight check" when it meant "no stepping over the railing").

I once tried to make American breakfast pancakes, but they turned out oily and far too thick because we only had yeast and no baking powder.

After teary goodbyes during the school farewell party, my host mom took me to the countryside to visit a historical museum.

When my study program ended, my father came to China. I rode the Maglev train to the airport to pick him up. We went north to Anshan in Liaoning province to visit my pen pal of many years. His former English teacher, Wen Junsheng, kindly arranged an entire itinerary for us during the four days we were there. My pen pal, Wen and their friends led us around the city, visiting museums, restaurants, a park and a local festival.

This is only a small snapshot of my wonderful China experience. I am very grateful to USCPFA for sponsoring my trip. I miss my classmates and host family, but we've kept in touch online. I can't wait to go back. 友