

Guilin 桂林

AJ Pressland Fund Travel Report

By Ana-Maria Marcu





Introduction

Sunset near the Li River in Guilin, during one of my first days in China

Hello! My name is Ana-Maria and I am a fourth year Engineer who took a four-weeks Chinese Learning programme at the Chinese Language Institute in Guilin, China.

Why Guilin, why China?

A famous Chinese saying is that 桂林山水甲天下 *Guilin shānshuǐ jiǎ tiānxià* which can be most closely translated to: 'The Guilin's Scenery is the Best under Heaven'. The city of Guilin is not only a vibrant community of almost 700.000 inhabitants, but also a place of rare natural beauty. The limestone mountains covered in trees and the serene atmosphere is what attracted me to study in Guilin. As I was looking for a rather quiet city to deepen my Chinese learning experience, I opted for Guilin in favour of Beijing or Shanghai.

I have been studying Chinese for three years in the Engineering Department and being able to attend a language course in China was my dream ever since the first year. After completing my first year at University I had the chance to attend an exchange programme at the Tsinghua University on Chinese Economy, Politics and Culture for two weeks in Beijing. It provided an excellent introduction to the culture and even since then I knew that I wanted to come back to China.

Thanks to the generosity of the Pressland fund this has now become a reality, and I would like to share some details about my study. If future applicants are willing to ask questions regarding my experience, I would be more than happy to be contacted on: amm272@cam.ac.uk



The Course

*The Entrance to the Chinese Language Institute in Guilin,
located on a quiet street near the mountains*

Over a period of four weeks I was at the Chinese Language Institute in Guilin as part of their Immersion Programme. The learning process was through both one-on-one classes with native teachers for 20h/week and independent study. Informal interaction within and outside the school also was key to improving my language abilities.

Prior to my arrival in Guilin, I completed an online form outlining my language targets and goals, as well as my Chinese learning experience. In my case, being able to use Chinese as a spoken language in everyday life was the main aim. Within the Engineering Department Language Unit I had a chance to learn how to recognise characters and how to read, but I felt like I had to practice my speech before the language could be functional.

Based on my outlined preferences and an initial test given at the start of the course I was enrolled at Level HSK2 – HSK 3, studying the book *New Practical Chinese Reader 2*. My timetable was designed accordingly: 10 hours a week of Comprehensive class, 6 hours of Speaking and 4 hours of Reading&Writing. Every day I would have one two-hour class in the morning starting at either 8:30 or 10:30 and one two-hour class in the afternoon from either 14:00 or 16:00.

The Comprehensive class was focused on acquiring new vocabulary and grammar in a rather structured manner, following the chosen textbook. The Speaking class was partly informal chatting which helped me develop more confidence in my speech and provided an opportunity to use the newly acquired language. The teacher would provide feedback on words that I could not recall, helping me learn what I would want to use during every-day life. The Reading&Writing class was more open-ended, we discussed the formation of characters and I got a chance to write texts and learn vocabulary on topics of interest to me, such as culture and movies.



***The West Street in the city centre of Yangshuo,
a bustling street full of culture***

At one point during my Speaking class I was describing the structure of a house, the location of kitchen, bedroom and living room. In order to stretch myself further, I gave dimensions to all the rooms, described how wide the windows were and how they were south-facing in order to attract more sunlight. At this point my teacher expressed his surprise: 'You can tell you are an Engineer!'. It felt satisfying to know that at this level I could start to communicate basic technical concepts.

One of the most rewarding aspects of learning was seeing the improvements every single day. Compared to studying the language at University, here I got the chance to interact in Chinese daily, during the lunch, going to the store or simply talking to other people in the school, to interns and teachers. It was very satisfying when a grammar structure or word suddenly came up in the conversation and my reaction was 'I learned this new word today!' so I could understand the meaning and respond accordingly.

The advantages of the Chinese Language Institute are the flexible learning based on your personal language targets, the immersive environment, beautiful surroundings with plenty of opportunity for weekend trips, organised by the school or by yourself. There are many locations suited for outdoors adventures, climbing, taking a boat, going to the local market and negotiating with the locals and tasting all the excellent foods around.

Guilin does not provide the same level of entertainment outside of the classes as some of the larger cities such as Beijing and Shanghai may have to offer. The local dialect is also more difficult to understand, as most of the people speak Guilin *huà* rather than *pǔtōnghua* - Mandarin. This means that practicing outside the class can be challenging, but also rewarding when the language barrier is overcome.

Overall, I would warmly recommend the Chinese Language Institute to any prospective students looking to experience China and to learn the language. The training was very well adjusted to my level and provided excellent opportunities to talk about topics of interest to me.



Exploring Further

The green rice terraces of Longsheng

There were numerous opportunities to explore the beautiful scenery of Guilin and the surrounding areas on the weekends and outside the classes. Weekly activities organised by the school provided further insight into Chinese culture and local traditions. Travelling independently was an excellent chance to put the language skills acquired into good use.

The first trip organised by the school was to a nearby city called Yangshuo. If the Guilin scenery is known to be the most beautiful on earth, the scenery of Yangshuo is the most beautiful in Guilin. Incredible karst mountains rising dramatically from the Li river, that is flowing peacefully. Cycling is the ideal way of transportation in Yangshuo so we followed the river with picturesque views on our way. Climbing the Moon Hill and drinking some delicious mango smoothie, together with other happy fellow students was a memorable experience. In the evening, as the sun was setting, we headed to a boat trip with palms and wonderful scenery.

I was very lucky to be in China for the mid-autumn festival, one of the biggest local traditions. In the night of the festival I arranged to go together with some local friends to climb one of the many mountains in Guilin, have mooncakes, a traditional mid-autumn festival dish, and celebrate together by watching the fireworks. It was very entertaining to have a full evening of chatting in Chinese during this unique festival.

The independent trip organised to Longsheng was also a great chance to speak Chinese outside the classroom. From renting a bicycle to asking for directions and taking the bus, all the interactions required knowledge of Chinese and I was incredibly lucky if I had just learned the required vocabulary.

All in all, those experiences broadened my horizons and provided depth to my language learning, consolidating the formal training received in class.



The Accommodation

Traditional Entrance to the Dazhai Village

There was a choice between living within the school or opting for a homestay. The choice that I made was to stay within the school as this was the more affordable option. The cost of accommodation was included in the tuition fee.

The school is situated in the Seven Stars District of the city Guilin, on a relatively quiet road close to the Seven Stars Park and Zoo. The main road nearby was busy and bustling with numerous motorbikes and cars. There were many shops nearby, as well as numerous restaurants making delicious local dishes. The bus station was a seven minutes walk from the school, making the city centre and other destinations easily accessible.

The accommodation that I opted for was located within the school, with the rooms situated on the top floors and the classrooms, kitchen and common activity room on the first and ground floor. In terms of facilities provided, it was a pleasant atmosphere with all the students being offered an en-suite room. The ground floor of the building was equipped with a big table designed for students to meet and discuss or have dinners together. During the ten-minute break from my classes I would come here to chat and meet new people, which was often the starting point of an afternoon adventure in the city to explore the surroundings.

The advantages of this type of accommodation are the ease of access to classes. Another important aspect of the school was the community feeling developed between the students, staff and teachers. Some of the teachers would also live within the school and most of them would attend the lunches, which helped in developing a supportive learning network. I would often share studying methods with my fellow students and exchange ideas. The disadvantages may be that it provides less exposure to the local culture compared to a homestay.

In terms of language learning, staying within the school provided opportunities to practice my language with the teachers outside the class hours, in an informal and friendly setting. I would recommend this type of accommodation to prospective students both for the affordability as well as for the quality.



Future Thoughts

Cliffs of mountains in Yangshuo

Over the past years China has been developing very quickly, with more and more programmes available to students interested in both the cultural as well as the professional development opportunities. The language programmes available vary widely in terms of the teaching style provided, the location and the size of the school.

Guilin is considered a small city in China, especially compared to Beijing and Shanghai. People here are very friendly and interested in talking to foreigners as well as pleasantly surprised whenever someone addresses them in Chinese and sustains a conversation. As a tip for future students interested in learning the language would be to focus on the parts you are looking to improve the most during your stay: tones, reading characters or acquiring new vocabulary. This would help plan your classes and keep track of your progress.

As an Engineer with interest in the technology, the current development of China is of great importance to me. Before attending the summer school my language skills were potentially too fundamental to be of actual use, but over the course of this month I have developed vocabulary that can be immensely helpful in the future to be able to conversate with native speakers and facilitate working abroad within an Engineering company.

In the following year I am planning to enrol in the Advanced Class for Chinese in the Engineering Department. The summer course has improved my ability to speak Chinese and confidently ask questions which will be highly beneficial during the course. Moreover, I feel more equipped with the skills to learn the language independently, how to study characters based on the radical components and how to investigate the sentence structure. The greatest challenge that remains is to improve my listening skills and to be able to differentiate between different tones while listening.

All in all, I am very grateful to the Pressland Fund for making this amazing experience possible. I am incredibly lucky to have been awarded the scholarship and my advice to any students at the University who are studying a language would be: just apply! There are amazing experiences waiting for you.