

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Who said that taxis are boring?

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Destination: Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

In this account the mobility experience begins with a nightmare taxi ride to the centre of Beijing. Manuel Recchia tries to explain to the driver where he wants to go – a hostel where he will stay for the first week, before the university dorm is available. Encouragingly, the driver seems to understand him. But then things start to go wrong. The taxi is hit by a car behind, both drivers get out and start shouting at each other, Manuel is left inside looking at the clock and the taximeter ticking over while Beijing traffic whizzes past on all sides and in all directions. The altercation stops as suddenly as it has begun, but then the taxi driver can't find the hostel, and after a few unproductive calls on an ancient mobile phone he simply throws the phone out of the window 'smashing it into a thousand pieces.' At this point Manuel decides for reasons of personal safety, to pay the driver and continue the search for the hostel on foot. And that is when things start to get better...

Finally. After four years of studying, the moment has finally arrived. When you get the confirmation e-mail of the flight, you really understand what you are about to do. Where you will be for the next five months. You really understand that this time it is not a distant hope. It is there, all paid for and confirmed.

The dream is about to come true.

China has always been a difficult destination for me to define, to imagine. When I first started studying Chinese at university, maybe by chance or maybe not, then that country so far away was not as distant as before. But there was always that feeling... the one that, despite this, it was still an unattainable step.

But instead...

29th August 2017. The beginning of a great adventure. After endless hours of flight, I finally land in the city that will give me a warm welcome to China, Beijing – or the Capital of the North, if you prefer the translation from 北京. Do you know what was the first thing I saw when I left the airport?

Grey. It is polluted, something that I have never seen in Sicily. But I am so excited to win this challenge vs China that, almost involuntarily, while sitting in the taxi headed to the hostel, I take the phone and take a picture of 'the sky.' 'I have to show it to my parents', I think. Here, in the taxi... right here is born the first true story I can tell since I arrived in China.

I am alone. My friends took a taxi together because they will all study at the same university. I stay a week in the hostel because I still can not

get into the university dorm. I arrived too early in China, I wanted to visit the city first. I stop a taxi. I show off my best Chinese and I tell the driver where I have to go. He immediately understands me and I already feel satisfied by this experience. 'I learned something in these four years', I think. Still euphoric from my first real Chinese conversation, I continue to ask questions of the driver, to test my skills 'in the field.' I do not understand everything yet, but we manage to talk in some way.

But I do notice a very small detail. Two minutes ago, we were on the highway heading to the city center from the airport... now we are still on the highway, but in the middle of the city. Or at least I think it's a highway. What do you call a two-way road with four lanes in each direction? The only thing that does not convince me is that it passes through the city. And there are traffic lights. I had never seen this before. Despite this, we are stuck in the traffic on this 'highway,' right in the city center. Suddenly, a car hits us from behind. Not strongly, but enough to make my body detach from the back of the seat. Then I think, 'here we are... not even an hour in Beijing and they're already hitting my car. Who knows what can happen in the next five months?'

Still stuck in the traffic, the driver gets out of the car and goes to face the guy who has hit us. They each begin to tell their own side of the story (...I think, I cannot understand anything). The tones slowly begin to rise. With the same speed with which the two raised the volume of the discussion, the cars around us begin to move, but the two drivers do not seem to want to get back in their cars and resume the journey as fellow drivers. I sit in the cab, looking at the taximeter and at the clock. They're still out there talking while the cars speed around us. I think, 'I cannot believe it... are they serious? Among thousands of taxies, I had to take this one?'. Suddenly, they go back to their cars with the same initial calm and proceed as if nothing had happened. I do not ask questions and hope to arrive soon, safe and sound.

We are almost there - I know it, thanks to the hundreds of pictures I saw weeks before, sitting on the sofa. Yet another problem. The driver does not find the hostel, even if he keeps on yelling the address to his cell phone. So I take the matter in my own hands and give him the number of the hostel. I tell him to call it, they can definitely direct him better than the phone that has decided to go against me and my wallet. The driver agrees and dials the number on an old mobile phone. I do not understand anything at all because they speak dialect, but I think that there is something wrong. After several trips around the neighborhood, with the phone in one hand and the steering wheel in the other, the driver decides to pull over and throw the phone away with all his strength, smashing it into a thousand pieces, and then go - as fast as the best *Fast & Furious*. Speechless, I do not want to believe it. One hour in Beijing and everything has happened. I already have a thousand things to tell everyone. After the movie scene, the driver pulls over again and tries to reassemble the cell phone. Naturally, he fails

miserably. So I decide, for my own safety, to get out of the car, wherever I am. I would have continued on foot, asking all the people if they knew that hostel. Someone has to know it. I get out, I pay, I take my bags and I greet my first Chinese friend, aware that I would never forget him. Thank you, you gave me the very first Chinese story. His name is Wang, like it is something new in China.

