

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

An unexpected journey

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Destination: Jilin Huaqiao University of Foreign Languages, Changchun, China

Andrea Rizzo survives minus thirty degrees of winter and stringent university rules in the old capital of Manchuria, and makes a lasting friendship.

It was February 17th 2017 when I received that email. The list of the students who had been accepted for the Overseas program. It was the first time I had applied for such a project, and I was feeling nervous. I really wanted to go to one of the first two choices that I had submitted: Beijing or Nanjing. Both very big, unique and fascinating cities. There was also a third choice, but I only chose it because of the 30 possibilities to be accepted, certainly not because of the city itself: Changchun. A small city (for Chinese standards) where snow season goes from October to May, with temperatures that reach -30°C. I thought how could they live there? With all these thoughts in my mind I opened the link in the email. 'Beijing' ... There's not my name. 'Nanjing' ... There's not my name. I was starting to lose hope as I reached 'Changchun' and... My name was there. I didn't know how to feel, because on one hand I was happy to have won such an amazing chance to study Chinese, on the other hand I could hear the -30°C whispering cold words to me. After a few hours the excitement and happiness took the upper hand, so I replied to that email saying that I was more than ready to go to Changchun the first semester. And I couldn't have made a better decision. But I didn't know it yet.

By the end of August, after a long three-stopover flight, we reached the old capital of the Manchurian State, in the north-eastern part of China. Winter was yet to come, and accompanied by with this warm welcome, I reached the University campus. I was impressed with how big it was and how many buildings were there, I could see myself losing my way to the dorms every day. After some days, when all the students had arrived and we all settled in, we had the entrance exams, and we had assigned to the classes. Teachers were very kind and available, and hearing academic Chinese 4 hours a day for 5 days a week it really helps you improve. But I believe that the real challenges were outside of the campus, where people only speak Chinese, with all the influences that the north-eastern dialect had on it. If you make sure that you find yourself speaking with those people, travelling as much as you

can, meeting as many people as you can, then you're studying a language. Of course you need a preparation to be able to make conversations with everybody, but teachers studied to have the most comprehensible pronunciation and when we'll start working or we'll go back to China we'll meet very few teachers. That's why we need to learn the language also through other ways. This is more challenging with the Chinese language because in China there are very few people who can speak English (or something else apart from Chinese), and even fewer who can speak an understandable English. That's how I have always tried to approach to this language, and many times this view allowed me to make friends. One night for example we wanted to find a new place to have dinner. On the internet looking for 'pubs' we found one that looked nice and was close to us. As soon as we entered, there was this young waiter that smiled at us and ran to welcome us and to show where we could sit. While we were choosing what to eat, he started asking us questions like where are you from, why are you in Changchun, and so on. At first he used an online translator, but when he saw that we could answer in Chinese, he started speaking Chinese as well. After everything we had ordered arrived, more beers and fruits arrived as well. We didn't ask for those, so we were looking for that waiter to tell him, and we saw him in the distance smiling and winking at us, as to say 'that's a gift'. From that day every weekend we went to that pub where food was good and cheap, but most of all because we were happy to chat with that waiter, and he was even more happy to have so many western people that he could call 'friends'. When there was live music, we asked for songs to dedicate to each other, when he wasn't busy working he sat with us. He even brought us gifts to celebrate that his girlfriend was pregnant! Unfortunately, our university had so many strict rules (some of them were absurd), so we had to be back pretty early. But we that didn't stop us. After months, it came the sad 'this is the last time we can come here' moment. He cried, he sincerely cried, and even more when we gave him the pictures we took together along with a small dedication as our thank you gift. We still keep in touch through WeChat, and we both hope that we could meet again soon, hopefully in Italy so that I can offer him food and drinks as he did with us.

It feels like yesterday when I opened that email, but it's already been more than a year. We visited so many cities and places, met so many people, done so many things, and I still can't understand how could we have done so much in just 5 months. What I can understand is that it was an amazing opportunity and I feel that I have made the most of it. I survived those -30°C, I survived the university rules, I survived the food. I spent so much for this adventure, time, money, energy, but in this kind of experiences the more you spend, the more you get rich. And this is something I would have never imagined when I said my 'yes', it was indeed 'An unexpected Journey'.