

My Culture 'Shock' in Germany

by Junior Fellow 2007 Yang Yang

1. Where the Campus is

When I first arrived in Technical University Berlin, I was totally confused because I couldn't tell where the campus was. It seemed to me that the entire region was occupied by the institutes, but the roads that connect the different institutes with one another are for public use; there are also Starbucks, bookstores, and other shops on each side of the road. If you are not a student there, you can hardly tell which building belongs to the university and which does not. There is no clear boundary for the campus; people may drive past several institutions in the morning on the way to work, a student may take a public transportation from the teaching building to the cafeteria to have lunch and then take another bus to the library. The things that seem impossible in Chinese Universities take place very often in Germany.



The picture was taken from the window of my classroom. Inside the picture are the Mathematics Institute, the Chemistry Institute and the famous Street of June 17th.

In China, universities almost always have different campuses and these campuses may be far from each other, but they are usually enclosed areas. The campus is like a society intended only for students: living zone with shops and cafeterias, and studying zones with teaching buildings and institutes, gathered not far from each other. You can spend your whole life on campus; in fact, some of my friends don't go out of campus for two months. Why bother when you can get all that you need on campus! While most of the students in Chinese universities live in their dorms within campus, students in Germany have much more to worry about in matters of housing. The dorms are quite limited and one needs to apply for it. Those who do not live in the dorms need to rent a room, and sometimes the room they rent

could be far away from the university.

In this sense, if there is an activity say, a public speech and needs promotion, there would be more work to be done in German Universities than in Chinese ones because of the indefinite area of their campus. I observed an interesting thing that happened: some student societies of TU Berlin posted fly sheets on trees at the cross-roads in order to catch the students' attention.

2. How the Cafeteria was

I don't know about cafeterias in other German universities but in TU, the cafeteria did not provide supper. Cafeterias could never be run this way in China because students actually live on the campus. I spoke with some students in TU and they told me that most of time they just go back and cook dinner themselves. When they move to Berlin from their hometown for University, they need to take care of themselves in many ways and that makes them very independent. Chinese students also face the challenges of living independently when they become university students but they don't need to worry about the rent, about what to eat for dinner, etc. because they are taken care of by the university. Those students were also quite surprised when I told them that only a small proportion of university students in China took part-time jobs because that may influence their studies.

Back to cafeterias, the biggest difference I found was the system they charge the food. In the cafeteria, one can fill the plate with whatever is available, a little bit like a buffet. When you finish filling your plate, you go to the cashier and she will charge you based on the *kinds* of the food, instead of the quantity. That means the price for a plate full of potato is just the same if you just take one spoon; and that in turn is much cheaper than taking one spoon of potato and another spoon of carrot. I was quite surprised at first because in Chinese cafeterias, different *quantity* of food, say rice, are charged differently – those who eat more should pay more. So in TU's cafeteria it's really cheap if you want to just get full, but more expensive if you want to have a balanced nutritious diet. If this system is introduced into China, I'm afraid some students will totally forget about the balanced diet in order to save money for other use!

3. Great Preservation of the Old City

A lot of cities in Germany were badly devastated during the War, but those of great historic importance were rebuilt according to the files and photos. So it is quite often the case that in a historical city such as Dresden, there is an old city and a new city. The structure and the buildings in the old city are preserved almost the same as the painting drawn hundreds of years ago.

When I saw how the German people and government tried hard to retain or rebuild their cultural relics, I felt sorry that quite a few old Chinese towns were torn down deliberately in the past in order to give way to the modern development of the city. Although some famous buildings are as well preserved, they are now standing side by side with the newly built

driveways, witnessing the loss of the wholesomeness of a historical city.

4. A Little About German People

I don't like expressions such as 'German people are like...,' or 'Chinese people are like...'. Actually there are always some exceptions and no one can be said to possess all the qualities that have been long associated with one's nation.

Here, I would like to just note some different points which I found quite interesting:

When I first met the new people in the university this summer, they were very polite and thoughtful, but a distance was always well kept. So I guess if a German comes to China, he/she might soon feel overwhelmed by Chinese people's over-hospitality and curiosity towards foreigners. But when I and my friends became close to our teacher in the end, she was really nice to us. She even baked a cake and cooked a typical German meal so that we can have a real taste on what German people eat at home.

Generally speaking, Germans speak good English. But if you talk to them in German, they will first be quite surprised and give you a big, warm smile. They listen very carefully in order to understand us and try every time to talk to us with the simplest words with the gestures they can come up with. I am really grateful to them for being so patient and in this way my German did progress quickly.

There are far more pets in Germany than in China. When the pets in China are most of the time cute and small, quite a lot of pets in Germany are big, like the sheepdogs or so. Pets can go with their owners on the subway, to some public places, which could be impossible in China (because sometime it's even difficult for a person to find place in a crowded subway).



Taking the dog for a walk— a common street scene in Germany

I also think that Germans value vacations much more than the Chinese. Chinese people are likely to work voluntarily and sacrifice their vacations, but for German people the 'Urlaub' (vacation) is very important. When I was in Hamburg, a local told me that the shops were going through bad times; one reason was the bad economic condition and another was that so many people were out of town having their vacations. When I was travelling on the highway, I also saw a lot of cars with boats or bikes on top, probably heading to some fun place. I think for many Chinese, work is the first priority in life. But for Germans, their personal lives are at least as important as their work.

6. Go-Green in Germany

Dumping the garbage in Germany was too complex for me. Even after one-month of staying, I am still not sure about the rules of garbage-sorting.

When I first arrived at my dorm, my friends and I were totally surprised by the garbage area beside our building. I am not exaggerating when I say garbage *area*. There were too many garbage bins of different colors intended for different kinds of wastes. For leftover food, for package, for paper, for glasses (a bin for white ones, one for green ones and one for brown ones). If you have old shoes or clothes, you can throw them into the boxes special for them on the side of the street. I can't list all the rules but I believe there are many more. On one hand, I do appreciate this garbage-sorting plan where more materials can be recycled, and by doing this we are friendlier to the environment. On the other hand, I was totally confused by the complexity. It is much easier to list the sorts, but when I actually had some garbage in hand I realized how hard it was to put this into practice. For example, when I have a paper bottle with a plastic lid, shall I throw sort it into paper or shall I first detach the lid from the bottle and put that into plastic, and then the rest into paper. That demands much more work and thinking when you consider that you need to throw all your garbage into a single bin in China. However, I still think the little bit of inconvenience is worth the while and once you get used to it is not a big deal.



The bin for old shoes and clothes on the side of the street.

The care for the environment can also be sensed when travelling in the countryside where a lot of windmills can be seen for the production of electricity. The windmill itself is not that special, but it is when you see them one by another, some larger, some smaller, stretched such a long distance. What beautiful scenery they made together!



7. China and Germany

In a non-political sense, China and Germany are long bonded in the history and you can see the evidence in Germany's historic buildings and decorations of the palaces.

If you chance to go to the Charlottenburg palace in Berlin which was built in the 17th century, you will not miss the big collection of oriental artwork in the palace. In fact, in a few chambers, I felt that I was visiting a palace in China! Not only were the decorations from China, but also the furniture was imported from China. The goods from China were regarded as something luxurious at that time and were specially favored by people from the royal family.

The curiosity towards China, a mysterious land for German people can also be observed by some architecture. The typical pieces can be the Chinese Teahouse in Potsdam and the Pillnitz Palace in Dresden by the river Elbe. However they are definitely not imitations of Chinese architectures, as it was impossible for the German architects to go to China or even see a photo or a depicted drawing of Chinese Palaces. What they could have done is to build based on the limited resources that they had. So when I saw the Palaces, the feeling it evoked in me is quite complicated to explain. It was like eating well-rendered Chinese food in a foreign country – one can sense the familiarity but the taste is very different from that at home.



A typical palace in Pillnitz Palace in Dresden, Germany with the elements of Chinese architecture.

Nowadays, it is much easier for people to know more about the world either by traveling by flight, or by sitting on a couch watching television. If someone wants to build something in a foreign style it is so much easier to get the resources and he can even invite foreign experts to help. However, the imagination of the architects is somehow hindered than in the past.

At present, the two countries are still making efforts to know each other better. I encountered the China year in Dresden, where a lot of exhibitions of Chinese art work were available. As far as I know, those artworks were all transported from museums in China, which offered travelers in Dresden a great chance to know about China. Also there were pictures exhibits in the open air for free which attracted many people. Those pictures were about the differences between the Chinese and the German, which had once been shared on metal.