

Students enjoy a meal at Shanghai's famous Gongdelin Vegetarian Restaurant.



STUDY ABROAD: SHANGHAI



The group – and a few Chinese tourists – enjoy an evening tour of Shanghai by boat

Led by Professor Christopher Reed, “Shanghai, 1750-2050” was a 2015 May Session study abroad experience for nine undergraduate students. They studied the history, culture and language of Shanghai, the world’s largest city, at East China Normal University. Professor Reed is scheduled to lead the Shanghai study abroad experience again in 2017, with tentative dates of May 5 to June 3, 2017. The program is coordinated by Ohio State’s Office of International Affairs.

By Christopher A. Reed

“A month in Shanghai can do quite a bit [for] a person with no prior experience travelling outside of their own country. Fortunately for me, this trip has been almost nothing but a positive experience, as I have seen myself change as a person and my confidence in my academic and social ability grow exponentially.”

So wrote one of the students who participated in the 2015 May term offering of History 3798.03, “Shanghai, 1750-2050.” This program — which combines urban history with language study in the world’s largest but also one of its most livable cities — is the final one in a GE Chinese-history sequence that begins with surveys of East Asian history (2401 and 2402).

Like other courses in the series, “Shanghai, 1750-2050” is a humanities course. It is student-centered. Students are expected to be actively involved in creating the course throughout the program. Unlike the others, our “classroom” is the campus of Shanghai’s East China Normal University along with the city’s streets, restaurants, museums and public transportation systems.

The program’s primary goal is to inform students, partly through personal experiences of the sort introduced above, about the history and future of Shanghai. By the end of the four-week program, students become capable of making their own informed judgments about the chief historical events and developmental trends influencing Shanghai and China at the beginning of the 21st century.

Apart from formal academic learning, however, an equally important goal is to encourage students to learn about themselves, their identities and their own country by comparing what they experience in Shanghai with what is familiar at home. Writing about these kinds of differences, another May 2015 student observed: “Although the USA and the PRC clearly have different systems of government and public policies, as an American staying in Shanghai I found that the cultural differences that I observed ... were much more complex than the simple dichotomy of free vs. un-free. There are clearly some restrictions in China that are not

present in the United States ... Still, for the most part, my daily life was more affected by cultural than by political differences. Some of the differences that I noticed were ones that I never would have expected.”

Daily language instruction by professional language teachers in ECNU’s Ministry of Education-supported Global Center for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language helps students take the first steps toward cultural and linguistic independence. By the end of the program, all students learn, at a minimum, how to read and order from a Chinese-language menu.

Professor Christopher Reed, who has been working, living and researching in Shanghai on and off since 1990, and running study-abroad programs to China since 2004, serves as both resident director and academic director of this program. In consultation with faculty and administrators at ECNU, with Ohio State’s Shanghai Gateway and Office of International Affairs, he designed it for Ohio State students. He provides pre-departure and post-arrival orientations, lives with the students at ECNU, attends the program’s classes, helps guide discussions, monitors student progress, assesses student work, participates in the afternoon and weekend site visits locally and out-of-town trips (including Suzhou and Hangzhou), and generally provides guidance, commentary and administration.

At the end of the 2015 May term, summing up the wide range of her experiences, a third student observed “Spending the past month in Shanghai has been exciting, frightening, interesting, disorienting, enjoyable and very foreign! But after all, that’s the point of a study abroad. I decided to participate in this program because I wanted to do something new, unique and out of my comfort zone. Having spent no time in Asia, no time learning Mandarin and essentially no time studying Chinese history ... everything I learned and experienced was new to me. At times, having such a limited background made things more challenging, but it also made it easier to keep an open mind. That being said, I had a wonderful experience in Shanghai and feel I learned a lot about the city, the people, the history and myself.”