Internship report

Company: TCE London
Location: Leatherhead, surrey, UK
Internship period: 20.02—20.04.2017
Working field: DMC (Destination Management Company)

Time flies and my 9-week internship at the event agency TCE London has just finished. By writing this meaningful report for myself and for anyone who is interested, I would reflect on both the happy and gloomy moments, aiming to better understand differences and become a more tolerant and open-minded person.

To start with, I must admit that I found my placement abroad through the company I have worked for in Germany. Yes, connections matter! But no worries, I have talked to the HR of the placement company and they would like have more applicants for an internship. Just google TCE London and you would find their info contact to apply.

If you are also an Asian student studying in Germany and trying to do an internship in the U.K., the next step is to apply for a Tier 5 contemporary worker visa and possibly apply for the scholarship from the Erasmus plus project via the help of Arbeitsamt at the LMU. There is a very important but difficult-to-get document – the sponsorship certificate from the British Council. They are A-level rated organisation that can issue the document, however, they are the sponsor that only kind of guarantee your well-being but not really sponsor you with money. Don’t get confused by the names. What you might get is the scholarship from Erasmus Plus project depends on how long your internship would be, but at least 60 days. The process of getting a sponsorship certificate took me around 1 month including document preparation, not too long but be aware that it really depends on how many applicants they have. So be quick if you can get the documents ready.
Then the visa application took me around 3 weeks before receiving my passport and visa through post. The UK. Gov. did take my passport away for about 3 weeks, which is something risky for a foreigner, because the passport is the very only ID to identify ourselves when abroad.

After almost 2 month’s document preparation, finally having my ‘precious’ U.K. visa and having the accommodation offered by TCE in a homestay around the neighbourhood, everything is ready for me to go and begin an interesting adventure. On my arrival day, TCE was very kind and let my mentor Fiona to pick me up at Heathrow airport. We hugged when we met for the first time as a greeting manner. So the night before my first day at work, I bet with the landlady and the landlord if I should receive more handshakes or more cheek kissing when I met all the colleagues for the next two months. The landlord, a business man who has been working in a state agent for years, believed that I would only received handshakes; while the landlady, from a feminine perspective, insisted that at least my mentor Fiona and the HR who has been in Email-contact with me for months would hug me or cheek kiss. I personally had the same expectation as the landlady. Surprising enough, as I Chinese, I should probably expect all handshakes because we are not very keen on having too much body contact either, and thus handshakes are preferred in business occasions in China. But since I have been in Germany for more than 2.5 years, I get used to the central-European kind of greeting – cheek kiss or hugs. What happened on my first day at work? I was feeling a bit nervous and excited, and got ALL the handshakes from everyone! The landlord won and it turned out the English people are quite similar to Chinese in many ways and this is exactly one of them.

Before handshaking with everyone, I was lucky enough that the landlady decided to give me a ride that morning. However, after that it was quite some hard time for me due to the unreliable bus service in town. TCE locates around 5 km away from where I was staying and bus seemed to be the only choice for me at the very beginning. But there was basically only one bus service that goes from where I lived and where I worked and the bus schedule is such if I miss one, I would have
to wait for another 2 hours. It was all very stressful every morning around eight and every afternoon around five and I did miss the bus sometimes. And it was not because I was there too late, but in fact, sometimes the bus just never came for whatever reasons and you would never know.

One evening in late February, the sun went down early and the wind still blew. I did not manage to catch the bus and had to walk for 15 minutes to get another bus at a different station. But I had waited an hour and could not do anything else but watched out to the direction where the bus should come. Because if I did not reach my hand out for the bus driver, the bus would pass without a second of hesitation. I finished work at 5 pm and still waited at the bus station at around 7 pm. I was on the edge of frustration and the very human thing is that sometimes, it is very hard to give up what we have worked for or waited for. So I kept waiting and it was bloody cold. My boyfriend called around seven and then I could not stop crying. I might sound fragile by this point and I did take a taxi afterwards by calling the taxi company. Obviously there was no taxi on the road for people to stop and go like in the city centre. The lesson of this very dramatic bus experience is firstly, I will always be home no matter how troublesome it could be on the way. Having that in mind, I guess I should survive my 9-week stay in this town in the outskirt of London. Secondly, I realized without this experience, I could hardly appreciate the convenience I am enjoying today in Munich city centre or in my hometown Shenzhen as much as now. Indeed, the best solution to transport in countryside is driving a car. The town I was staying Ashtead and the neighbour town Leatherhead are the same as every other countryside with many cars driving fast or shall I say recklessly. There were always traffic jams on school days’ morning and afternoon. I did look out for other solution to shuttle, such as bike or train. Train seems to be more frequent and reliable, but train stations are quite far from work or homestay, so out. Coming next is my bike story with regards to the indirectness of English people and environment pollution.

After several negative experiences with the local bus service, I was seeking for a bike as an alternative transportation method. There was a bike from the son at the
homestay and I decided to ask if I could rent it since during school days, he did not really use it. But instead of saying No to me directly, the landlady would just encourage me to try another go with the bus. From similar high-culture background, I was always able to know what did she mean by letting to try the bus again— she was reluctant to borrow or rent the bike to me. The benefit of being indirect is to save faces for each other and ultimately remain superficially friendly. We never had a quarrel during my whole stay, which according to a friend of mine, is regarded as a successful homestay experience. I do not doubt that sometimes there could be serious conflicts between the homestay family and the staying person. But in my case, maybe there were some kinds of conflict between us, but we decided to never speak up. I have been aware that it is very likely due to my personality that I am more like a trying-to-be-nice-kinda girl. I avoid confrontation and let go of most whatever bad experience. Nevertheless, going to work for a 5 kilometers, riding a bike would only take me maximum 25 minutes while the bus took me around 1 hour including walking from home to station, time for waiting and the indirect route for the bus to take more guests. I was convinced that I must get a bike somehow. Since the homestay is not very supportive on this matter, I tried to ask colleagues in the office if there should be a bike store where people can buy a second-hand bike or rent one. Truth is, it is always worth asking. My mentor Fiona was super kind and would like to lend me her bike during my internship. She even got her husband to drop the bike to where I stayed. Exciting enough, I could not wait to ride to work the second day morning!

Indeed, the bike-ride was successful that I managed to get to the office still ALIVE. Not being dramatic here, but riding in the main road instead of the bike way was in fact dangerous and poisonous due to the horrible car or motorbike exhaust. For safety concern, cycling to work was no longer the best option and the bike remained to function as my fast transportation between homestay and train station (a shorter distance with some cycling possibilities) so as to catch a train to London city centre. Basically, I resorted to bus service and it turned out no matter how stressful or long lasting it could be during the waiting for the bus, I did
manage to shuttle for work. It’s another lesson for me about the truth of our daily lives. Imagine we could shuttle for only an hour per day for work, two hours on the way seems to be forever and miserable. But if that is the amount of time that we have to spend, no other options, we would ultimately get used to it and no longer feel difficult after giving some complaints at the beginning. We would find ourselves a book to read, a video to watch or a phone game to pass time on the way.

I started to appreciate the benefits that I have been enjoying without recognizing when I was in Munich. I also realized there is actually a survival strategy in our mind that allows us to be released from the agony of the repetition of some everyday routine, for example, getting up early and taking a bus for an hour. It helps but it also numbs us. Because when we get used to something, we stop seeking changes of it.

I took the bus for nearly a month until one day I missed it again and the weather seemed nice enough for a long walk. Though the shoes I was wearing weren’t for a 5 km walk, but it was flat and okay. After about 11 songs, I was home! Unbelievably easy! I was thrilled because I got to see all the whispering of spring on the cherry trees, on the blossom of daffodils and still-light sunset. But how come I never thought of it before as a solution for shuttle? Maybe it was because the sky was getting dark early after work at the beginning; maybe it was because I have never walked for such a distance in Munich except travelling; maybe it was because I got ‘numb’ with the unreliable bus service. That’s my another little reflection at the end of this long shuttle story.

Moving on, I would like to talk about breaking the stereotypes! First on my list is the food in England. Since I was based in the south England and had only travelled the furthest to Worcester, I guess my experience cannot hold true for Scotland, Wales and others, so limited to the food in England, which comprises English food and food to be found there. The stereotype is that English food is often perceived to be terrible for NO reasons. People who are not living there told me so and my Chinese friends who have been there told me so. But after living with a very English family and having dinner with them for a month, I would tell you that
English food is good without rosemary. English food serves preferably warm and fulfilling dishes. For dinner, they have the amazing fish pie with the magical smoked fish meat that really gives you a real treat after work. Other typical English dishes, such as the shepherd’s pie, pulled pork, cheese and leek pancake and so on, are all really tasty. The English stuffing is also very popular and ‘tasty’ at home, served with the beautifully roasted chicken and gravy. But I am not used to the flavour of rosemary, so I do not like it. The same applies to any foreigners who do not enjoy some ‘crazy’ Chinese or German cuisines with their strange spices. So I will not deny the deliciousness of English food just because the rosemary in the stuffing.

Food in England is diverse and the best part is that we can easily find all kinds of food around the world easily, especially in metropoles like London. What I think that most people might not know is that in China, it is rather difficult to find an Indian restaurant or Lebanon restaurant due to maybe political factors or more. But in London, we can definitely find some good Chinese food in China town, Japanese food around the Japan centre in Leicester Square, Indian and Bangladesh food in Brick lane, English pubs in Soho and fresh stuff in the Borough market and so on. The diversity of international food is what Munich or some other metropoles in mainland China lack, and it is exactly the charm of London.

During my 9-week stay in the south of England, the stereotype that was broken is the weather and I regretted leaving my sunglasses at home. It’s said that the British cure of all awkwardness is to talk about the weather. In fact, that is true but it is not the stereotype of quick change of weather that was broken, but the amount of sunshine. I am happy to say that the sun has managed to find its space in the sky in almost 90% of the days I spent there, though only from late February till late April. But being positive about the sunshine in summer, I personally was not gloomy about the weather in the south of England. Maybe different years, different rains, but let us break the stereotypes and bring the sunglasses when we are visiting the U.K. next time.

About work, one thing that stroke me was the quick tempo in the whole
industry compared to the event industry in Germany. Since I have been working in the same industry for nearly a year as a working student, I picked up the job quickly. My main tasks were more about assisting the enquiry stage for project managers. I sent out both email and phone enquiries to hotels, restaurants, celebrity agents, theatres, sightseeing agents, etc., basically all kinds of suppliers that an event would require. What’s interesting was, the suppliers who cannot response within 24 hours would be out of the game. In contrast, in Germany, we would leave it at least two days. I believe the business there were more competitive, and because of that, you would have the diversity. Due to my short stay, I was not able to participate from a macro perspective to observe an event, by which I mean the overall control of a single event. But surely one day when I have more experience in this industry, I will.

As a linguistic student, there was some sensitivity I had for the office English. For example, ‘by the close of the play’ was quite frequently used in email to mean by the end of the day. What a cute comparison of work and game! They would also use the word ‘action’ to mean everything – ‘Please action that email now’ means to reply or forward an email; ‘There is nothing to action’ could indicate that all the enquires are taken care of.

All in all, I must say this 9-week abroad really took me away from the comfort zone I had in Munich. I firstly got away from the comfort zone I had in China and started my adventure in Germany. Augsburg was the initial city I stayed for a year and I was not used to the underground or even the many Chinese fellows in Munich as I moved in 2015. But then eventually, we all became part of it and we tend to think this is the way life should be. It must have been a while that I should admit, the western and the eastern world for me are Germany and China. That’s it. But the real world is in fact much more about that and I should keep moving. We all do. Because we all find a new self after some different experiences.