

How it all began



Ralph Koppitz
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is a lawyer focusing on corporate/M&A and labour law in China. From 1997 to 2002 he worked in the Beijing office of a major international law firm. In 2002, he joined Taylor Wessing as partner and head of their Shanghai office.

Ralph studied Law in Munich, and in 1996/1997 Chinese language at Beijing Normal University in China under the scholarship granted by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). He has served as member of the Boards of both the EU and the German Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai. Since 2010, he is elected member to the Board of the German School in Shanghai.

Ralph married his Chinese wife Linna in 1999. They have three children.

After an internship in a Singapore law firm, I became more and more interested in Asia and China in particular and started to learn Mandarin Chinese. At the end of 1995, I decided against the offer of the German Foreign Service to do an internship as legal trainee (Rechtsreferendar) with the Embassy in Nikosia/Cyprus, and instead went to Beijing to learn at one of the two German law firms established there.

“The internship in Beijing was the most exciting one I had done until then.”

Christmas was spent at the Hard Rock Café near the Lufthansa Centre. But it turned out that one of the major preconditions for more intensive work as a lawyer in China was that I had to improve my Chinese. This is when I turned to the Beijing Office



Participants stayed in the nicest rooms on campus

of the DAAD and for the first time met with Konstanze Ilg who recommended the programme to me.

In summer of 1996, after a short language and preparatory course in Bochum, I returned to Beijing as part of the first intake of "Language and Professional Training in China". Konstanze Ilg met us at the Terminal 1 of the old Beijing airport, which had only very few gates and smelled horribly like old socialist Beijing. We were an interesting mix of professions: graduates of Economics, Chemistry, Biology, Forestry, and Law – just to name a few. We went on

“There was only a brand new third ring road at that time, and it was empty. No traffic jams, just a few yellow “miandi” bus taxis, some buses and many non-electric bicycles.”

a short bus trip to Beijing Normal University. Our dormitory building was the best one on campus. It even had an elevator, and each of us had a single room with our own bathroom – absolute luxury compared to any local Chinese student. When I visited the campus about ten years later, I found that our canteen had been converted into a McDonalds, and a huge new library

had been erected nearby. In 1997, only Chinese food, plus a little bit of Japanese and Korean food was available around the university. If one craved Western food, a 30 minute cross-town trip to the Lufthansa Center was the thing to do.

Except for on or two participants, nobody had a laptop and nobody used email. Communication with family and friends in Germany was done by airmail letters. Telephone calls and faxes to Europe were possible but extremely expensive.

There are many interesting episodes I remember during 1996 / 1997:

- my first birthday party at the Great Wall
- the Korean and Japanese students who were always so much better in reading and writing compared to us Germans
- a bomb explosion in the no. 10 bus near Xidan close to our university allegedly caused by Xinjiang extremists
- the DAAD trip to Shanghai, during which we wanted to visit BOSCH, but ended up visiting a counterfeiter's factory producing drilling tools
- the sadness of most Chinese when Deng Xiaoping passed away in February 1997, and the crying people we saw throughout the city

- the celebrations during the Hong Kong handover on Tian'anmen Square a few months later

“The DAAD scholarship was the real start of my life in China.”

Although I had signed a German contract with my law firm at that time, they decided to immediately send me back to Beijing. Today, I am still enjoying the work and life, and (most of) the cultural differences this country has to offer. Thank you, DAAD, for providing this opportunity!



The dormitory Xinsong Gongyu and Beijing Normal University campus in the 1990s

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