

King's Student Perspectives

Asian and Middle Eastern Studies: Chinese

Helena, 2nd year
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I'm enjoying studying Chinese at King's very much. Both King's and the AMES faculty are exceptionally diverse, and everyone comes from different backgrounds. This means that, whatever your situation, you will (hopefully) feel at home and welcomed. There's no need for anyone to feel out of place.

Why Chinese?

I've been passionate about China and Chinese all my life, and I can't really say why! I taught myself Chinese for about 5 years before coming to Cambridge, but it is taught ab initio here. So in the first week I was put up into the second year. This is fairly unusual, but as I say, the good thing is that almost everyone here is fairly unusual in their own way, so there's no need to feel awkward because of your individuality!

Motivations for coming to study Chinese are very diverse: some are simply interested in languages generally, some have a specific interest in the history, or in China as an emerging market, or the literature, etc. Some know no Chinese before they come; some have done a little bit, perhaps a GCSE. Those who already know enough to skip a whole year are really very few, but there are some. If you think you might be one, just take the initiative to talk to the teachers as soon as you

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arrive. If it seems right, they will ask you to informally take the end-of-first-year exam like I did, to check whether you would really benefit from skipping a year. Don't be shy – you don't want the term to get too far ahead (seeing as it is only eight weeks long)! But, if you haven't done any Chinese before, don't let my experience intimidate you. Many people start from scratch, love it, and do very well. I think the Japanese department may be a little stricter, and are usually less willing to let people skip the first year.

What is second year like?

Second year has been great! Chinese is such a wonderful language to learn. The characters are beautiful and the tones musical; its grammar and morphology gives you a complete paradigm of the world, and if you're like me, it's an intuitively

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comfortable and liberating language to speak. There are a certain number of compulsory language classes, and then a pool of cultural/miscellaneous papers to choose two from.

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These vary from year to year, but this year there was dynastic history of China, history of modern Chinese globalisation, linguistics, East Asian cinema, and Japanese politics. I chose dynastic history of China and East Asian cinema. Most have two or three hours of classes or lectures a week. Some have essays set, or require presentations. "History of Globalisation" is assessed through a mini-dissertation rather than an end-of-year exam like the others.

Can you tell us about the teaching?

There are about ten one-hour language classes a week. Some of these are split into smaller groups, so there might only be 5 or 6 people in the class. Some are oral, but many are texts-based or translation-based. An hour of class takes at the very least an hour to pre-prepare if you want to do well, but it obviously depends what your strengths are, and how hard you

want to work! If you haven't learnt any Chinese before, some experience with language-acquisition, or some confidence in one's ability in that area, would be very helpful. These ten hours include three classes of classical Chinese, which is for many a big challenge at first. Even if you know a lot of modern Chinese, learning how to translate classical texts is hard and takes quite a time commitment. However, we definitely make rewarding progress and it gets easier. We seem to be developing a deep understanding of the language through

understanding its roots. Also, being able to read poetry from the second century, or memoirs from the eighteenth, in the original Chinese, is a wonderful experience once you get into it. It gives an amazing feeling of being connected to the writer across time and space.

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The East Asian cinema course is great. Cinema is one of my passions, and to be given a quick guided tour through the film industries of Korea, Japan, China, Taiwan and Hong Kong is a wonderful opportunity! We've seen twelve films together and had lectures on all of them. The faculty library has a fully-borrowable, large and excellent DVD collection, not just for East Asian cinema but for all the languages/countries covered by the faculty (their Korean collection is particularly gobsmacking). Many people taking this paper find the opportunity to develop their 'artistic' side, through the study of cinematography very pleasant. I'd already been interested in Asian cinema, but this course has broadened and deepened my understanding so much, and it's been really fun!

And supervisions?

Supervisions are generally the best bit. We have one modern Chinese language supervision and one classical Chinese language supervision a week. For the optional papers it varies; I get one for every essay I write on

cinema (four this year so

far). Language supervisions are usually in groups of two, but sometimes it might just be you and the supervisor. Either way, it means you get a lot of tailored guidance. This is a great privilege at Cambridge. Apart from being academically helpful, it also means you get the chance to talk at length to PhD students or professors, who often have fascinating life experiences. It develops your confidence and eloquence to have an hour's discussion each week with your supervisor, and naturally you find yourself becoming more and more at ease in the company of the interesting academics (and others) in Cambridge.

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What are your plans for the Year Abroad?

We can go to a university in Qingdao or Beijing. I'm going to Qingdao, because the classes are smaller, the climate is better, and it has a beach! I'm really looking forward to it! Lots of people are really looking forward to going to Beijing too. The fourth years (who were abroad last year) have met with us and given us lots of help and advice, so a lot of our practical questions have been answered. There are also loads of people in the faculty (or Cambridge generally) with contacts and suggestions for volunteering opportunities, travel opportunities, internships, summer courses, so most people in the class have some exciting plan for the coming summer. Personally I'm hoping to spend a month at a Buddhist monastery in Taiwan before going to Qingdao; others, for example, are taking language camps in Korea, teaching English in Japan.

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The course must be pretty hard work, right?

I can't speak for other people, but it seems a lot of people (in my second year class) did find the first year workload very hard. However, I think they feel it's been worth it and it's made them very capable, fearless students! My own feeling is that if you love Chinese, it is all worth it. There is a lot of work, but there are also a lot of ways to have fun or

develop non-academic skills and projects in Cambridge. So, you really have to find a good balance.

How does the work-life balance work?

Again, everyone has their individual way of doing it, so whatever you feel you'll be comfortable doing, it'll be okay.

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Personally, I'm in King's Voices (King's mixed voice choir), and I joined the Chinese calligraphy club. The Chinese calligraphy club is a great way to meet Chinese people! King's Voices sings one evensong service (in the Chapel) a week, and has two rehearsals. It's a great way to meet people from different years and subjects in King's. The standard of singing is fairly high, but the time commitment is

much less than at many of the colleges (e.g. Clare), because at King's, the all-male King's College Choir

sings six days a week. King's is bursting with outstanding musical talent of every kind (as is Cambridge in general).

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What about more general socialising?

King's has a nice bar with a pool table, and the college family system - every first year is assigned 'parents' from the second year - provides everyone with a friendly support system. There are lots of pub quizzes, DJ nights, comedy nights. Clubs and societies are another excellent way to socialize. AMES is a small faculty, and in my year at King's there are only three AMES students - the

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other two are Arabists. So it's not like most subjects where you have a ready-made pool of college classmates to bond with. But, the Chinese class (in my year, 17 people) is very close-knit, and it's great having such a diverse group of friends that spans all the colleges. I've been to formal halls (formal college dinners) at Clare, Fitzwilliam, and Christ's Colleges – although sadly I can never invite them to King's (King's halls are

exceptionally good quality and fun, but they are not on every night and tickets are snapped up by King's students, which make it hard to invite out-of-college guests).

And the character of King's?

Due to various reasons (e.g. the eclectic accommodation system) King's people often make friends across years, which doesn't necessarily happen so much at all colleges. The convenient centrality of the college, the architecture, beautiful backs (and useful bridge), and the outstanding formal halls are often admired across Cambridge. I would say the normal hall food and the accommodation are good, comparing to some other colleges I've had experience of. Just over the backs (over the river), the college has allotments for students, and beautiful gardens.

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The idea that King's is particularly diverse is true.

Everyone's religious inclinations are different, but the college dean and chaplain are lovely and indiscriminately friendly, and if your thing is formal high-church Anglicanism with daily world-class male voice singing, King's Chapel is for you! The idea that King's is particularly diverse is true – there are many international students, and many LGBT

students too. I remember on matriculation day, a tutor giving us a talk telling us to follow our own path and ignore any peer pressure – that's so King's.

The musical scene is lively and the college has a fair amount of resources, which can mean things like cheap punts, subsidized singing lessons, and essay competitions with generous prizes. The bar entertainments and "May Ball" (the King's Affair, a "June Event") are also considered excellent.

So all in all, King's is a good college!

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A note to current King's AMES students

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying AMES at King's for our prospective students to read, please email Kristy in the Admissions Office for further details: undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk.