

# German professor finds city of opportunities

Xu Qin

For most Westerners, Christmas is associated with cold weather, mulled wine, and a tree nearby a fireplace. The Szurawitzki family from Germany, however, has decided to throw all tradition overboard and head to south China's Hainan Province.

If all went according to plan, they are enjoying the warm sunbeams and fine sand beach of Sanya right now.

"Technically, we don't get time off for Christmas. It all depends on us switching lessons with other teachers. Fortunately, they're all very understanding because they know it is a big deal for us...and that we want a holiday," Michael Szurawitzki told Shanghai Daily.

Last week, Szurawitzki, a professor of Germanic Linguistics at the city's Tongji University, met up with Shanghai Daily to talk about his move to Shanghai, the many opportunities and challenges that have come with life here, and why the city holds so many great opportunities for him and his family — despite its daily annoyance.

Before moving to Shanghai, the family lived in the central German city of Goettingen, where he held a doctorate in Germanic language and literature.

At a conference in Poland in 2010, Szurawitzki ran into professors of Tongji university — a coincidence that would be life changing, as one of the professors, Zhu Jianhua, was elected president of the upcoming congress of the IVG, the federation of German studies.

Zhao Jin, dean of the university's German Department, contacted Szurawitzki later, asking if he would like to come to China to assist Prof. Zhu to prepare for the conference in Shanghai five years later, which is this year 2015.

"It was an easy decision for me to make the move," Szurawitzki said. "Tongji offered me a full professorship, and as part of the deal my wife, who also holds a doctorate, was offered a job as a lecturer in the same department."

In Germany, professorships are often tied to reaching a threshold age, Szurawitzki said, and, as German is losing its significance, finding a professorship in the UK, France or in other European countries has become more difficult.

"But in some countries, such as Brazil, India and China, the demand is growing. That's one very hopeful thing for me being here," said Szurawitzki. "Besides, I got the chance of getting my share of organizing this big congress taking place in Shanghai. As Head of the Academic



The Szurawitzkis stand on the Mutianyu section of the Great Wall in Beijing on the Chinese New Year's eve last year.



**We have a happy life here and have made many acquaintances and some good friends in the past year and a half.**

**Michael Szurawitzki**  
Professor of German, Tongji University

Program, I was put into the spotlight and my work became very visible."

## IVG congress

First established in 1956 with an aim to promote German studies worldwide, the IVG congress is held once every five years in a different host country where German is taught and studied.

Tongji, as the first Chinese university to hold such an international academic conference, put a lot of effort and money into coordinating and organizing the one-week event, which took place at the end of August.

More than 1,200 experts working in university-level research on German language and scholars of German literature from 69 countries all over the world came to Shanghai and participated in a total of 51 thematic sessions.

The main theme of this year's conference was "German studies between tradition and innovation," and entailed subthemes, such as "Goethe and Confucius," and "Opportunities and Challenges of new media."

"For those closely involved in organizing, it's like a once-in-a-life-time event spread over one week," said Szurawitzki.

Thankfully, the result was fruitful. According to Szurawitzki, the feedback was good, especially when it came to scheduling and organization of the event, which was described as particularly smooth.

He is now editing a volume on the conference and expects to see the publication of 13 books that will come out over the next couple of years. All together, they will count roughly 4,500 pages made of some 1,000 papers that were presented at the congress.

"Now I am in a dynamic country, and also a dynamic city, which is experiencing a positive development for German language studies. I feel that I am being at the right place at the right time," he said.

Aside from enjoying his work in the university, Szurawitzki said coming to live and work in Shanghai has meant a huge change for his family as well.

He has two kids, a boy and a girl. Both are studying at the German School's Pudong campus and have been taking Chinese language and culture courses as part of the school curricular activities since their arrival.

His wife, Agnieszka Szurawitzki, is teaching language lessons for beginner and mid-level students, plus a class of engineers from the Volkswagen Company in Changchun in north China's Heilongjiang Province.

Living in guest house with a tiny kitchen provided by the university has freed the family of daily household chores. The family loves take-out food but also enjoys gathering at restaurants. They have fallen in love with Sichuan cuisine, which is uncommon in their native Germany.

"In Shanghai, you get a wide variety of food if you are not afraid to try it," Mrs Szurawitzki said. "There's a variety of different tastes that you would never expect in Europe."

## Apps and websites

Ever since Szurawitzki applied for a Chinese credit card and learned to use many of the Chinese apps and websites with an English version, he finds that he has been able to delve deeper into different aspects of life in China.

They have been to sport events such as Formula 1 in Jiading, the Chinese Super League at the Hongkou Stadium, and the Rolex Masters Tennis in Shanghai's Minhang District.

They have also taken advantage of the many classical concerts and ballets shown at the Shanghai Grand Theatre.

In addition to the city's many cultural offerings, they have traveled to historical cities and scenic areas around China, such as Hangzhou, Suzhou, Beijing and Xi'an.

A trip to the Mutianyu Great Wall in Beijing on the Chinese New Year's eve last year was one of the family's highlights.

"The view was fantastic. There were few travelers on that day and nobody, except for the four of us, was in sight on the walls for one or two miles.

"Suddenly, you've got all this ancient history of China you once read about right in front of you. For me, it was overwhelming, like a childhood dream come true," Szurawitzki said.

He said the family is surprised at how spontaneously short trips and family outings can be planned as opposed to Germany.

Though they have been in Shanghai for only a year and a half, they feel like staying here for more than three years. Every day in Shanghai has been a new experience and has given them new input.



Szurawitzki and his two kids at a wet market near the campus of Tongji University.