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My Love-Hate Relationship with Mandarin

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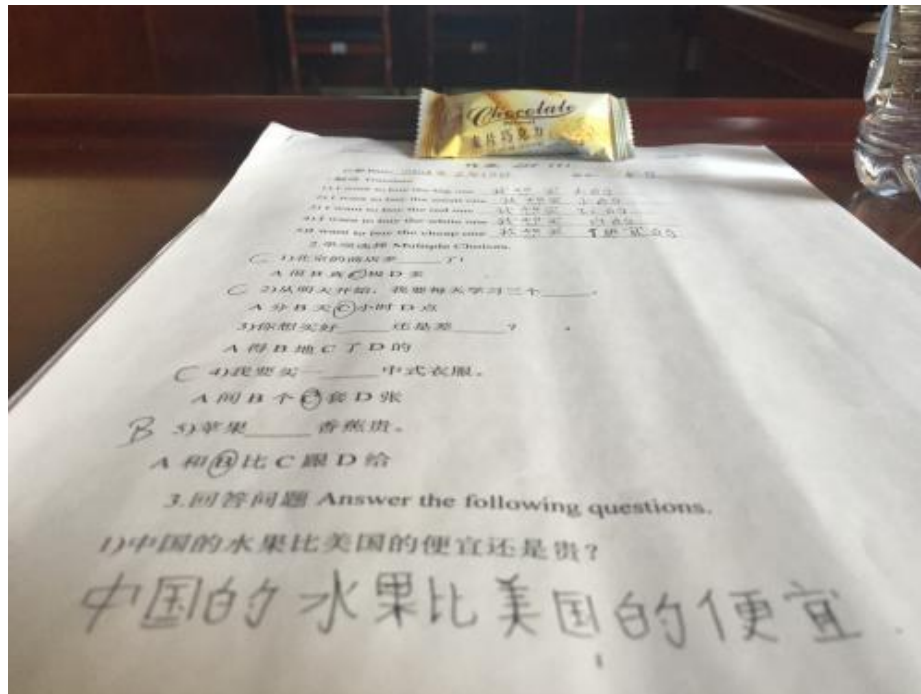
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My Love-Hate Relationship with Mandarin

Mandarin is a hard language and the road to proficiency is long and can be exhausting. That said, I cannot emphasize enough how useful it is to know even a little bit of Mandarin. Because in my encounters thus far, there are a surprisingly few number of people that speak English...at all. This is of course excluding the CSI faculty who are fluent English speakers.

Assimilating, therefore, into a completely different culture can be difficult if you don't have either an adequate speaking and comprehension level or have an amazing faculty available to support you. Luckily, we have both. There are some students here who didn't know a word in Mandarin before arriving in Beijing and are surviving just like the rest of us. I can, however, only speak from my point of view and affirm the fact that knowing a considerable amount of Mandarin has enhanced my experience greatly.

Firstly, it has made the hassle of shopping for the simplest things easier. Secondly, as mentioned above, since very few people speak Chinese it is sometimes the only way to communicate with people and that comes in handy when you need help. I was heading out of campus to meet some friends and although there are options for transportation equivalent to Lyft and Uber (they have what's called "Didi Dache" here), public transportation is so cheap that it would be foolish not to utilize if you have time. I got lost transferring from one line to another in the subway and had to ask an attendant for directions. I was able to use my broken Chinese to communicate exactly what I wanted and although I did not capture everything he replied (they speak so fast), I got the gist of it. I hopped on the next train I was supposed to and before I knew it, I was having dinner with my friends.

That obviously was not the first time I had to use Chinese. After grabbing a meal with some friends before class, I walked over to a counter where they sold drinks. This is a

memorable time for me because, for the first time, I did not have my Chinese-speaking friends as a crutch (they usually intervene when it takes people too long to understand what I'm trying to say). If you have been learning Chinese, you know that one of the most difficult things, and for me the most difficult, is saying words with the right tones. If you use an incorrect tone when you say a very harmless word, you could accidentally communicate something vulgar, offensive, or outright hysterical due to the context. But I nailed this one, and it really boosted my confidence and desire to speak more. I walked up to the lady selling drinks and as she asked me what I wanted, I replied "Y píng shu" which translates to "a bottle of water." She didn't even ask me to repeat! She just put the price down so that I could pay with my card. One of the best bottles of water that I've ever had.

But aside from the immediate gratification, I realize now that without that experience, I would have never had the confidence to tell my friends that I can make it over to wherever they were and they did not need to come pick me up. It was that moment that helped me realize that I would definitely fail if I didn't try. And it was that very moment that still inspires me to continue to learn Chinese although the coursework keeps getting harder. Finally, it was that moment that reinforced the notion that these few months would truly be life changing. I apologize for the corny nature in which I tend to end my blogs. Above is a picture that represents Chinese class quite well. It features one of the best snacks consistently available at the CSI office and my Chinese homework. That perfect blend of chocolate and cereal is what has helped me through many a difficult day.