

Chinese, how to say?

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“He Xi Long” (pronounced “huh? seeee loong?”), my tutor tells me on our second day of tutoring. “What does it mean?” I ask her. She tells me that from our conversation the day before when she kept asking questions about myself she, with the help of her friends, came up with that as a Chinese name for me. “But what does it mean...?”

Before I answer that question though, let me tell you why a lot of people I chose China as a Junior Term Abroad destination. Many people wondered because after all, I wasn’t pure Chinese. Secondly, it was the second most expensive destination, and the five half scholarships offered required me to fight out other JTA aspirants whose Quality Point indices could run circles around mine. Some even thought I went there to pursue a girlfriend!

Ironically, they guessed the very reasons that first led me to choose China. It was precisely because I wasn’t fully immersed in Chinese culture that made the prospect attractive. For QPI and cost, I gambled that other students with higher QPI would be turned off by the price tag, and would rather use their first choice on a cheaper, less competitive location for a sure shot (I barely squeaked in for the 5th scholarship). Finally, I already knew English, why not practice good investing and diversify?

The truth is though, my friends were right about something, I did choose China to pursue a love of mine, and that is language. I credit my course advisor, Dean Rudolfo Ang, who early on recommended (maybe forcefully compelled would be a better description) I consider Beijing as an option for JTA. I have much to be grateful for this stay: China allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of a language and a culture I realize has shadowed me since I was a kid, two steps away.

As I quickly found out though, I had to take those two steps a millimeter at a time, carrying about 888 lbs, without rest.

I recall a friend of mine and fellow JTA student, mention before we left that a reason of his for taking JTA was to be taken out of his “comfort zone”, that is, from all that is familiar and comfortable.

This was true for me too. To learn Chinese I found myself studying more Chinese for one month in Beijing than the rest of my previous studies combined! I carried a small notebook everywhere to jot down new words and I learned to say “Chinese how to say” in Chinese perfectly. I was a nerd! It may seem weird but I take pride in the fact that one morning after the first week of class, my Chinese roommate excitedly mentioned that I spoke Mandarin in my sleep! I even booked another tutor aside from our regular one, causing me to run the highest overtime fee that semester! At one point I even asked an American who just introduced himself what “tone” Chinese his name was said!

Still, all that conventional studying didn’t cut it. The real learning came with usage: buying groceries (when you eat as much as I do eating out is expensive), using public transportation (taxis have a 70 peso pick-up fee), bargaining (90% off!) and of course, comprehending directions to the nearest bathroom (and where to buy toilet paper!). Even going out on weekends was no exception. All those nights with my roommate and his friends singing karaoke, which turned out to be good character-reading practice, eventually paid off when I was actually chosen to sing a Chinese song for Sino-American culture night (though to my eternal embarrassment, I still forgot a line). Even the most mundane things like repeating the score for a game, say, Badminton, become subliminal ways to take learning to a new level. In truth, I’m probably still at preschool level. A 10 year old could still confuse me.

Still, sometimes you learned exactly what to say. Then you get to have “high” moments like finally being able to help a local asking in Mandarin for information (ok I’m not **that** good yet my help ratio is like 1%, and that time the guy just asked the name of the building in front of me). Or when you’re pressured to **absolutely** have to use Chinese or literally get kicked out of where you live, like this semester, when me and my roommate had to take turns making up reasons to keep an illegal dog secret from non-English speaking employees in our dormitory). Then it’s all worth it.

I’ll conclude with some very sound advice: seriously consider JTA, especially JTA: China. When you go over the country list seeing cosmopolitan cities like San Francisco, France and Singapore next to it and ask “why China?” ask instead “why not?”

Maybe you have different reasons: the ability to explore the Silk Road (which you will by the way) or to live in a rapidly modernizing economic dragon (as a bonus you might get a Chinese girlfriend). Personally though: plane ticket: \$300 dollars, JTA 2005 semester \$5750, being able to write about your experiences using a cliché...well, you know what comes next.

PS. Oh, one last thing, you may forget your English...