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ENGL 109H

Professor Chan

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Do you speak Chinese?

*Ni hao. Wo shi li aien.*

I stuttered those Chinese characters out of my mouth as one of the church aunties asked me in Mandarin for my name.

She threw at me a few more questions, which I hesitantly answered, alternating between Chinese and English. I slowly slipped away as the conversation became too awkward, and I found comfort with my English-speaking friends.

I've always felt timid to converse in my ethnic language because I've never felt the necessity to master Mandarin Chinese growing up in the United States. I never took my Chinese classes seriously; I thought that as long as I spoke English, I would have no problem communicating. Little did I know that my inability to speak/write/read Chinese fluently would cause years of insecurity and desperate longing for a sense of belonging.

As a new decade started, I had high hopes for the year 2020. My parents and I eagerly planned for our summer Taiwan trip and my brother's graduation; however, like everyone else in the world, our hopes were quickly crushed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst dealing with the economic impacts, my family also faced the loss of a loved one that same summer we were all supposed to be back in Taiwan. I had never seen my father shed a tear until the night the news

broke to us, and I can never forget his grieving face as we prayed together for my aunt's spirit. Mentally distraught, my father desperately tried to find ways to move back to East Asia, and he eventually found a job opportunity in the northeastern part of China. Being only a three-hour flight from Taiwan was as if God answered our prayers, and before I knew it, I was on my 13-hour flight to Dalian, China. My home for the next three years.

The language barrier didn't seem like a problem at first. I was always with my mom for the first few days, so she translated everything for me and my sister. That didn't last long, though, as I felt the impact of not knowing Chinese when I entered my new school. Being an American international school is a very deceiving title; most of the students were Chinese nationals and spoke very limited English. I remember going to my first choir class of my sophomore year of high school and immediately feeling out of place. I sat down in my assigned seat, and everyone next to me was already talking to at least one other person. I tried to join a conversation, introducing myself in English.

*Cao. Wo zen me hui da?*

When I asked where he was from and what grade he was in, the student turned to his buddy and immediately asked how to answer my questions in English. Although my Chinese might not be great, I could at least understand that much in Chinese, so I told him,

*Wo ting de dong zhong wen. Ni ke yi yong zhong wen hui da.*

I reassured him that I could understand Chinese, so he could just answer comfortably in his language. His face immediately softened, as if a wave of relief swept over him, and he immediately spewed out long Chinese phrases. Unfortunately, I overestimated my Chinese vocabulary, and I couldn't continue the conversation in pure Mandarin. Changing to "Chinglish"

was the wrong move apparently, as the student and his buddy stopped talking to me and went back to their own conversation. In the end, there I was, sitting alone in my little bubble of English surrounded by foreign Chinese characters trying to burst through. I came out of that class acknowledging the hard transition and secretly wishing I never moved in the first place.

It wasn't just at school; the real problem came when I needed to get around the city. A month after arriving in China, I mustered up the courage to take a taxi by myself. Nervously, I waved a taxi down while standing next to the road. As I stepped into the taxi, the driver immediately asked me where my destination would be in the thickest northeastern Chinese accent. My nerves got the best of me, and I ended up stuttering the name of a mall in all the incorrect tones. The driver turned his head back in my direction, stared at me, and asked me to repeat it. I said the name again, trying to find the right pronunciation. That has to be right, I thought to myself. The driver turned back one more time, looked me dead in the eyes, and said,

*An sheng guang chang?*

Welp. I guess that is the correct way to say it, and I just nodded my head. Hinting a bit of annoyance on his end, I sat in the back of the car feeling nauseous, not sure whether it was the intense cigarette smell or my embarrassment.

Ultimately, my sophomore year was rough. However, throughout the year, I became more comfortable with daily conversational Chinese. I could maybe answer someone's question about my day and what I did. Little did I know that a larger challenge was waiting ahead of me as I transitioned to my junior year of high school.

To think I would be a leader of a Chinese nonprofit organization would have been a crazy thought when I first moved to China. Lo and behold, I was accepted into the position with only

conversational Mandarin Chinese after my sophomore year. During my junior year, I was in constant communication with local parents and the organization officials through the Chinese messaging app WeChat.

I was not used to this professional setting, though, struggling to formulate academically articulate phrases. In one particular instance, I made a mistake in a long formal introduction to the organization's program, and I didn't realize it until someone pointed it out to me. My blood ran cold when I realized that the message had been sent to a 200+ parent group chat, and I could not recall it. I braced myself for the consequences, rehearsing my apology speech to my higher-up over and over again. The fateful call came through. Suddenly, my nerves took hold of me, and I forgot all the Chinese I knew. I sat there on the verge of tears, trying to make sense of everything she was saying. I grabbed one of my many stress balls to calm down, and I caught one phrase at the end of her lecture that was the last straw before breaking down.

*Ni rang wo you dian shi wang.*

These words resonated with me for a long time. Not only was my supervisor disappointed in me, but I was also disappointed in myself for not committing more time and effort into fully reaching a professional Chinese language proficiency. Thankfully, my sorrow pushed me to work even harder in pursuing fluency, practicing Chinese at home with my parents and wherever I went. I strived to utilize all the available resources around me, asking my friends to only speak to me in Mandarin and going to my Chinese teacher's extra tutoring after school. I loved to go out and talk to the aunties and uncles outside playing mahjong, striking up conversations, and sharing my story of going back to my ethnic roots. The aunties and uncles also shared their stories too, whether it be about their first love or how they felt when their children grew up. They also gave me insight into Chinese politics, which caught me off guard as I thought it was taboo

to speak about the communist party. Every encounter encouraged me to break through the boundaries I set on myself, and my scope of Chinese knowledge drastically increased even through the shortest conversations.

A sense of accomplishment finally set in me during a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: an interview on a renowned local radio show. I was shocked upon hearing the invitation from an organization leader, and I honestly didn't expect them to ask me, an American, to go on their radio. I couldn't let this chance slip away, though, so I wrote a script on what I could potentially say. I grappled with using words I had never used before, but at the same time, I insisted on sounding native and not being forced to use this sophisticated vocabulary. To my surprise, I've never felt so prepared for the interview as the day rolled around. As the radio host asked her first question in the recording studio, Chinese rolled off my tongue smoothly, possessed by all those hours of rehearsing. All of a sudden, it didn't feel like an interview anymore. We laughed at jokes and shared our experiences, like it was one of those casual conversations I would have with an auntie playing mahjong outside my house. As my interview came to an end, the radio host, beaming from ear to ear, complimented my Chinese fluency, knowing I was a foreigner.

*Wa. Ni zhong wen hen hao. Hao xiang dang di ren!*

Her words felt like a pat on the back, validating all the nights of practice for this interview. I couldn't help but treat myself to a nice solo date afterward, eating an iconic Chinese hotpot meal to fully embrace the Chinese experience, not only from the language I learned but the culture around it.

Finishing off the meal with hand-pulled noodles, I reflected on my time in China. If you had told me two years prior when I first landed in Shanghai about how I could converse freely in

Mandarin Chinese, I would have laughed in your face. Mastering the language I “feared” to use from a young age was not something I would expect to do in my lifetime, but I am beyond grateful for being able to overcome all the obstacles that hindered my progress.

Now, you ask if I speak Chinese? Yes, yes, I do, and I am not afraid to say that.