



The view from my classroom in Peking University. In the distance we see parts of the Summer Palace.

China Language Study

REPORT FOR PRESSLAND FUND BURSARY SCHEME

Raghul Parthipan | October 2, 2017

Before China

I enjoy learning languages: they allow us to communicate and connect with more people. They open new doors and allow new relationships to form - simply because you are able to communicate.

My journey with Chinese started at GCSE, where a great teacher not only built up our language ability but also exposed us to the fascinating culture. Unfortunately, after GCSE, I stopped formally learning Chinese and my skills diminished; however, last year, having secured a place to teach English at the established RDFZ school in Beijing, I restarted my Chinese study via podcasts. This meant that when I was there I was able to be functional – I could order food, book train tickets and after teaching, travel around China.

My Chinese was not brilliant, but I could communicate with people and I took all my opportunities to practise and improve. My abilities shot up in the 6 weeks I spent in China, particularly the listening, due to the ‘immersive’ experience.

Therefore, after returning, I kept up my independent Chinese study and also took the CULP Elementary course for additional formal learning.

I longed for the next step however. Having done much study in the UK at an intermediate level, it would now be fantastic to actually use and develop my communication skills in the context of a Chinese classroom, where I would be able to use what I’d learnt as soon as I stepped out. It would be extremely exciting to formally learn the language during the week whilst being able to consolidate and improve on my abilities just from day-to-day interactions.

With the help of the Pressland Fund, I was able to take this step.

China

I arrived in Beijing on a Sunday morning. I soon found out that my suitcase hadn't make the same journey and was still waiting in Moscow.

And so my 'immersion' began.

I spent the first ten minutes queuing at the lost baggage area. I then remembered that queueing is more 'flexible' over there and soon sought out an attendant. Being thrown straight into it, it became apparent that learning Chinese in a classroom is quite the different experience to dealing with a rushing baggage attendant speaking at a jet-lagged you, in a pace only he'd understand, with a local accent I know I couldn't follow.

But with my trusty dictionary and the customary hand gestures, I was fairly certain I had succeeded in filing a report for my lost luggage, so I cleared customs to meet my Beijing friend (I'd met him last year whilst teaching) who picked me up and took me for a much needed shopping trip.

THE LANGUAGE PROGRAMME

The programme took place in the beautiful campus of Peking University.

Classes were every day from 8 am until 12 pm, split evenly between writing & reading and speaking & listening. We had taken an online proficiency test earlier, and this was used to split us up accordingly. I was placed in a class that provided challenge whilst not being too intense: I hadn't come to China to just study from books all the time – I needed to be out and about, speaking and listening to people, to make the most of the experience.



We were given the chance to move up/down classes, but looking back I am glad I stayed in the same class: I was still learning new things, but was able to complete homework and test revision fairly quickly, and so take my learning outside the classroom.

The classes itself were much better than expected. Instead of the rote-learning one might have suspected there was an emphasis on discussion and role plays which was exactly what I needed. This allowed me to develop my ability to be creative in the language and practise my speaking and listening too.

The classes were largely taught in Chinese. At the start it was pretty intense, with me trying to catch each word and failing to grasp the meaning of some sentences. But as the classes went on I improved in this aspect. It wasn't that my vocabulary grew to cover all the words that were said, but I became better at capturing the gist of what was said, probably by picking up on certain structures and having heard things multiple times in different contexts.

Over the course of the four week course, I practised a range of skills, had ample chances to make mistakes and be corrected, and made the most of the programme.

SOME EXPERIENCES OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM

There were an amazing range of people who had come to study this programme. They came from a variety of places with a variety of language abilities and it was great to have the opportunity to get to know them. It was nice to have friends who shared your interest in maximizing the benefits of learning in China.

Alongside this there were course volunteers, Chinese students at Peking University, who were assigned to groups of us. Their role was to field any questions from students and provide support if necessary. Our volunteer turned out to be so much more. He went by the Italian name of Francesco, and was doing a Masters in Chinese Philosophy. Throughout the course of the four weeks our group would go for meals, karaoke and more, with Francesco giving us a local Beijinger's perspective and recommendations. I remember one night we went to a local duck restaurant. An intense storm had caused a power-cut, and as we ate our meal purely under candlelight, Francesco enlightened us with his thoughts on Chinese philosophy amid the crash of thunder outside.

Lessons were finished by 12pm and this allowed us to have most of the day for ourselves.

I powerlift, so had to fit in 3-hour training sessions on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I've always thought you can meet some of the nicest people in the gym and this was indeed true in Beijing. Considering most of my sessions are spent resting, this was a great opportunity to further develop my Chinese. I made a variety of Chinese gym friends and we had simple discussions, facilitated by my Chinese dictionary and other friends who could act as intermediaries. I also learnt how to ask people if they were done with the gym equipment, if they could give me a spot and a variety of gym-specific vocabulary and phrases which I wouldn't have picked up in the classroom.

Yes, when they heard I could speak some Chinese they'd often start a conversation and soon find my difficulty in keeping it up. But it didn't matter. Everybody was having fun and learning about new languages and cultures; it was a really enjoyable experience.

Food in China was really cheap, and we'd often split our meals between the campus canteens and local restaurants. Once again this was a necessary time to use your Chinese, and an important time if you wanted to be given what you thought you had asked for.

In addition to this there was a good helping of the phenomenon that is karaoke, a fair amount of trying to navigate Beijing's roads via hired bicycle and even more language struggles, and so, more opportunities to practise.

It was a sad time to leave after the four weeks. I had made a number of friends both from Beijing and elsewhere and had an amazing experience – not only had I greatly improved my Chinese due to the necessity of its use, but I had learnt more about the culture and sampled what it would be like to live in Beijing.

After China

I've been keeping up my Chinese via online language podcasts. This has built on from my trip and I am enjoying developing on what I learnt in Beijing. In addition, I've set up some Skype calls with some of the local Beijinger friends I met, and this will be a great way to practise as well as keep in touch.

In the longer-term, if I do move to work abroad, China would be a top consideration for a number of reasons. These include the size of its economy, the growth of the startup community in Beijing and Chengdu, and my personal affinity for the language and culture. This project has deepened my understanding of Chinese culture (vital to understand if I am to work there), allowed me to experience life in China in order to be more prepared should I eventually move there, and of course greatly improved my language. China has a huge non-English-speaking population, and even if I do not achieve fluency, being able to communicate sufficiently opens up many doors.

I have very fond memories of my time there and would like to thank the Pressland Fund for giving me the opportunity.