

Chinese Language Study at Princeton in Beijing

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This summer, I received the opportunity through the Goldsmith-Adams Research Award to participate in Princeton in Beijing's summer Chinese study program. Princeton in Beijing is an eight-week language-intensive program. Students take classes in the morning and have one hour of individual conversation in the afternoons, and cover the material of two semesters over the eight weeks. As a fourth-year student, I was expected to have prepared either an oral news report or a debate topic before every class, which allowed me to most fully utilize my time to improve my speaking abilities. At the beginning of the program, all students signed a language pledge in which we stated that we would exclusively use Chinese in all our communications until the end of the program.

To say that spending eight straight weeks speaking nothing but Chinese was difficult would be quite the understatement. I reached a point where I was having trouble thinking entirely in English, much to my frustration at the time—I couldn't take a break from Chinese even in my head! My conditioning to use Chinese even transcended into real life a few times, for example when I accidentally used Chinese to tell my parents to “wait a second (等一下)” over a Skype call. However, while at first I was frustrated by these experiences, I quickly came to realize that they embodied just how much my Chinese was improving. The Chinese words popping up in my head at random were words I with which had reached a level of fluency to the point where they came to me more naturally than English ones. Even writing this report, I find myself wishing I could use certain Chinese words that have become fluent to me over the past few weeks.

All throughout the program, I saw my Chinese improve in many ways. I passed an all-Chinese sign outside of my apartment every day, and in the beginning could only read about half of the characters on it. However, over the past eight weeks I've found that every week or so I could read more of them, and by the end I had learned just about all of them. Perhaps the greatest indication of my improvement came when I got to meet and chat with an older Chinese man during the last week of the program. Talking to him, I found myself using and hearing many of the words from textbook lessons I'd learned over the course of the program, including ones I had read just hours beforehand. To see that the words I was using could apply in real life situations, to current societal issues, really proved the value and effect that my hours of studying had already had.

I found through that conversation that I'd improved not only my Chinese, but also my knowledge of the history and culture of China. Being in fourth-year Chinese, I was lucky enough to get to take lessons on a variety of current Chinese issues, from China's population problems to the country's ethnic minorities to the current relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China. While I could have taken courses on such subjects in English anywhere in the United States, I found the experience of taking them in Chinese, and in China, much more rewarding. When reading English-language articles about China, I'll often run into loosely translated phrases which convey only part of the original Chinese meaning, and found reading the Chinese version much more clear and rewarding. Additionally, the program's location also provided the opportunity to talk about these cultural and historical topics with Chinese people from a variety of different backgrounds, and to see the effect of the subjects of our conversation topics in action every day. I'm very grateful to the Goldsmith Adams Research Award for having provided me such an incredible and unique opportunity that not only allowed me to vastly improve my Chinese speaking ability, but also gave me a whole host of life experiences that I will never forget.

Faculty Mentor: Songren Cui

Funded by the Goldsmith Adams Research Award