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These past two months I spent studying Mandarin in Harbin, China through CET's intensive language program were not only the most intense summer I've had, but also my most intense semester yet! 20 hours of class a week, daily oral presentations, weekly quizzes, comprehensive tests and to top it all off, a language pledge that didn't allow me to speak any English at all. The first week and a half was especially tough: my language skills were nowhere near as advanced as my classmates' and I couldn't understand 80% of what my Chinese roommate talked to



One class period spent visiting tea town to sample and learn about the complicated beverage

me about. I had to ask people to repeat themselves three or four times before understanding enough to reply, and even then I couldn't necessarily express exactly what it was I wanted to say.

Slowly but surely, though, my language abilities increased. During class my teachers answered all of my questions with an incredible amount of patience, but I think it was the time spent outside of class that helped me learn the most. Although Harbin is a pretty big city, it doesn't have many foreigners visiting or living there, so I'm almost always surrounded by the sounds of natives speaking *pǔtōnghuà*, or standard textbook Chinese. This is the incredible experience I would not have been able to have if I did not study Chinese in China; no matter how many hours are spent in a classroom with a teacher, language acquisition really does only come by speaking consistently with natives.

Although my study abroad was just that – *studying*, CET also planned many outside the classroom activities to integrate our textbook knowledge with our cultural experiences. Some of these activities included bartering with fruit stand owners (well, actually just buying fruit from them because none of the salesmen were willing to barter), interviewing retired professors about the aging problem China is currently facing and meeting with the editor of a local newspaper to get a behind the scenes look at publishing. These were invaluable experiences because we were able to directly apply the vocabulary, grammar and topics we had been studying in the classroom to a real life situation.

But this summer wasn't all intensive studying; I also had a lot of opportunities for fun! My American friends and I got close with a few Chinese roommates and would go out with them quite regularly to grab



A weekend trip to nearby Fenghuang Mountain; cruising down a rock slide instead of taking the stairs back down!

coffee at a cat café, go shopping at a giant mall or sing karaoke at a KTV bar. Every other weekend CET also planned cultural activities to introduce us to Harbin. We had a scavenger hunt around the city, explored historic old Harbin and, my favorite, ate a completely vegetarian feast at a Buddhist restaurant.



Accepting my award for most improved Chinese student

On the last day of my program we had a graduation ceremony to sum up the semester and celebrate the hard work we had all put in. Some awards were handed out, and I won the one for most improved Chinese! All my teachers told me they were initially very worried about me when the semester started, but by the end my language abilities had improved by leaps and bounds. I could tell that I was having less trouble getting by day-to-day speaking the foreign language, but it's really tough to personally assess overall improvement with something so gradual as learning a language, so it felt extremely rewarding to be recognized for all the hard work I had put in that paid off in the end.

I am extremely grateful for this opportunity I had to learn Chinese firsthand, meeting so many inspiring people and great friends along the way while exploring a new city and having a wonderful time. Thank you so much, AURA, for helping make this transformative summer experience happen!