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In Case You Missed It: *Dreaming in Chinese*

November 5, 2010 in [Books](#) by [mcunningham](#) | [Permalink](#)
By Maura Elizabeth Cunningham



Each time my three Chinese I classmates and I complained that we had chosen a language that was simply too hard to learn, our professor had an answer at the ready.

“Over a billion people speak Chinese,” he would say, the corners of his mouth twitching with a repressed smile. “If a billion people can learn it, so can you.” With that, he would grin broadly, chuckle gently for a moment, and then turn our attention back to the seemingly impossible task at hand.

Our professor’s mirth spoke to a fact that he knew just as well as we did: learning any language is difficult, even more so when the student is an adult (check out David Sedaris’s essays in *Me Talk Pretty One Day* for his thoughts on the challenge of learning French after forty). But Chinese can be *especially* difficult, as David Moser explains with unabashed crankiness in his 1991 article, “[Why Chinese Is So Damn Hard](#).” Moser points to tones, characters, and esoteric *chengyu* as only some of the reasons that Chinese can be a particularly impenetrable language for new students—or even students who have been working on it for years.

Deborah Fallows certainly agrees that Chinese is hard, though the title of her new book— *Dreaming in Chinese: Mandarin Lessons in Life, Love, and Language*—should immediately signal to readers that her attitude toward the topic is decidedly more mellow than Moser’s. *Dreaming in Chinese* is a collection of vignettes and musings on China and the Chinese language inspired by her study of Mandarin during the three years that the author and her husband (Jim Fallows of *The Atlantic*) lived in Beijing and Shanghai. Fallows is a linguist by training, and her work blends straightforward explanations of various Chinese language concepts with her own observations about life in China. The fourteen chapters each focus on one Chinese word or phrase (for example, 不要 “don’t want,” and 听不懂 “I don’t understand”) that is somehow tied to Fallows’s experiences living and traveling in the country. Although the chapters are short, I found that Fallows effectively conveys many key grammatical points about Chinese—several of which I have internalized so completely that I had forgotten the logic behind them.

Fallows has chosen an apt title for her book, as the narrative itself has an episodic, dreamlike quality. *Dreaming in Chinese* is not exactly a memoir; Fallows does not provide a full account of her Chinese life, but instead skips around, sharing the moments in which some aspect of the country, the people, or the language became particularly legible to her. Nor is it a comprehensive text on the Chinese language and its intricacies. This might prove frustrating for readers in search of either an

expat memoir or a linguistic tome, but those who accept the in-between nature of *Dreaming in Chinese* will spend an afternoon immersed in its pleasant mediations on life, love, and language, as the subtitle suggests.

I wish I'd had a copy of *Dreaming in Chinese* seven years ago when I sat in my Chinese I class and felt defeated by the thought of ever learning enough of the language to hold a conversation or get through even a children's book. For most of us, gaining proficiency in Chinese is an endless series of "alien mental calculations" (p. 109) and reading Fallows's book reminded me that there is no shame in learning Chinese slowly. It's a hard language, one that teaches its students many lessons in patience and humility. And it is because of this very difficulty that non-native speakers savor small triumphs and tiny pieces of praise, as Fallows describes:

. . . you can find great gratification, which I craved and desperately needed to survive China, when you say something simple like "Shūdiàn zài nǎr?" "Where's the bookstore?" and someone will answer—with misplaced and generous praise—"Nǐ de zhōngwén hěn hǎo!" "Your Chinese is very good!" (p. 188)