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World-Wide Mandarin

IT WAS 2008 AND I'D JUST TAKEN UP THE STUDY OF MANDARIN. And, yes, it's difficult. It's not just trying to learn a tonal language where slight differences in pitch can produce a completely, at times embarrassingly different meaning. Take the word "ma": A slight shift in tone and, oh-oh, I just called my friend's "mother" a "horse". It's also that my brain and vocal apparatus simply can't seem to contort themselves properly to make certain sounds. My tongue is forever in the wrong place, "glottal positioning" as they call it, rolling r's or buzzing q's when apparently it should be doing the opposite.

Oh, well, I ask myself, why am I doing this anyway? Good question for a 60-something guy who stumbled over Latin in high school and managed his way bumblingly through Italy with a few key phrases and a winning smile. My stock response to friends who ask is a right-back-at-you, "It is the century of China, isn't it?" And then, I have to admit, I've always been partial to Chinese culture, Chinese food, Chinese women. And anyway, as my therapist helpfully pointed out, studying Mandarin at this advanced age is a sure way to keep from getting Alzheimer's. So there are health reasons, too, though I doubt my insurance company will ante up for the tuition.

But back to the subject of Mandarin and Chinese women. Quite by chance, I discovered a website, myhappyplanet.com, which will put you in touch with people the world over seeking language study partners and perhaps more. So I logged on and soon I was exchanging "ni haos" with Meilan in Beijing, Millie in Shanghai, and Song in Qingdao. It is quite amazing that an interest in Mandarin and the peculiarly ubiquitous nature of the Internet can open up contact with potentially untold millions of women on the other side of the planet. Who needs Match.com? It's all rather innocent, of course, a far cry from the deliberate, at times desperate seeking of most online dating sites. But, nonetheless, here I was exchanging stories and intimacies in fractured phrases with, judging by their photographs, several attractive women in China.

Among my new Chinese women friends, Meilan and Millie have turned out to be helpful language buddies, patiently correcting my wayward "pin yin" or phonetic Mandarin. (Learning and using the Chinese characters is a future Everest to climb.) In return, I edit their English replies, though it's certainly an unequal exchange, their language abilities far surpassing my own. "Your Mandarin is jian dan," Meilan told me. "Sheng shi, sheng que." It was simple, perhaps too formal, but more or less correct.

As we got to know each other, Meilan and I also began to exchange stories of our interests and our lives. Meilan, a teacher in Beijing, would often use these occasions to pass along various Mandarin phrases she thought I would like. When I told her I played blues guitar, for example, she responded by telling me a sad story from her past. "At university, a friend from my hometown, he play blue guitar," she said. "I know he love me, but he was shy, too. I'm a girl, a traditional Chinese girl, so I wait for the man. When he play his guitar, the music create emotional mood. I told

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me in my mind, if he say he loved me in that moment, I would accepted it. But he didn't capture the chance. I nearly falled in love with him." But what Meilan actually said, and taught me to say in Mandarin, was: "Wo zhui ru ai he le," literally "I fell into the love river" for him. I was charmed by this expression and made a point to remember it.

Swapping stories and phrases with Meilan and Millie was fun, but the relationship that captured me turned out to be the one with Song in Qingdao. It quickly stopped being a language lesson and took on a more compelling quality. Unlike the others, Song insisted from the beginning on instant messaging rather than e-mail. This live chatting started out innocently enough with questions about work and family, discussions of local scenery and architecture. And when Song put her 16-year old son on, we talked easily about the Sichuan earthquakes; his studies; music (I tried, unsuccessfully I'm afraid, to explain the concept of "soul" to him); and, of course, basketball. Every guy his age there is crazy about the NBA. Soon, Song took up her son's passion as well. One night, in fact, she and I followed together, live, the final tense moments of a Celtics-Pistons playoff game.

"Kevin Garnet injury?" Song asked anxiously.

"No, he's okay, too many fouls," I reassured her.

"I love K. Garnet," she said.

"And I like Ming from China," I told her. There was a long pause.

"Ming Dynasty?" she asked.

"No, no, big Ming, big Ming," I said, referring to the giant center who played for Houston.

"Oh, Mr. Yao Ming!" said Song, and we both had a good laugh over that mix-up.

So it went and soon we were talking every night and our conversations turned from basketball to subjects far more intimate. Since there's a 12-hour time difference between Qingdao and Boston, our talks at first took place in the late evenings for me, early mornings for her. She would be logged on at work and there were frequent "please wait me" messages, meaning "hold on, I'm busy." When she returned, I would make jokes about drinking a toast to her with a Tsingdao, named after the city and one of my favorite beers. At first these mythical toasts were to her health, to her son and his health, then to the success of her son's studies. But soon the toasts took on a more daring edge. I told her I'd drink a Tsingdao in praise of her eyes which she had shyly told me were very brown and very beautiful. And when I asked the meaning of her given name, Song Yue-shan, she told me "beautiful coral in the deep sea." So I told her I would drink a "pi jiu," a beer, to that, too, to her very lovely name.

We moved on from toasts to talk of our marriages (she was divorced three years, I was a widower for six) and our longings. At first, this rather chaste intimacy was sweet and a little fluffed, as if we were writing together in our MSN dialogue a kind of short-hand romance novel. But as our IMing became more open and urgent, the "please wait mes" began to pile up and we decided to move our talks to after work for her, which meant

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my logging on in the early mornings. It also meant our moving from chat to audio and then, later, to a Skype webcam connection.

Seeing each other at first brought only surprised laughter and then smiles of delight. It also immediately deepened our intimacy and openness. "I very honest," Song told me in the middle of one surprisingly explicit exchange. She had looked me in the eye and asked, "Are you love?" It was 6:10 in the morning my time and in my groggy, just awakened state, it took me a while to figure out what she was asking. She wanted to know if I had a lover. I had the sensation of having just rolled over in bed and looked into the morning face of someone I cared deeply for, the face of Song; and the rest of that conversation had the warm tone of two new lovers talking over their pasts and their hopes for a future together.

I looked forward to waking up early for our out-of-time talks. "Zao zhang hao," good morning, I would say to her good evenings or "wan zhang hao." This was always good for a giggle or at least a smile between us. "I missed you" would always come next, followed by the other saying "I missed you, too!" One morning-evening, Song told me,

"I frank to say I like your styles. Do you believe?" Yes, I believed. I told her I thought she was beautiful and I liked her styles, too. She said, "I think you don't like me when you meet me."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Because I am not beautiful like your imagery," she said. But, for all her anxiety, she quickly sent me a dozen or so charming photos and the next night-morning I told her she was "feichang piaoliang," very, very beautiful, both in image and in heart. I could see her shake her head on the webcam, but I could tell she was pleased.

We talked about how we were both single and lonely. How, if I came to Qingdao, we could be partners, lovers, friends. How there would be many questions and problems for us—distance, language, culture. Not to mention the potential shocks of a real rather than a net meeting. "Maybe you will be disappointed," I said. "No," she assured me. "If we have feeling, love, your heart to my heart, problems not matter. Life is short. We will be half of each other to make long life together."

Yes, but...I was starting to have doubts. This pleasant flirtation, this net romance with a stranger safely tucked many thousands of miles away was becoming far more pressing and serious than I ever imagined. Could this be for real or was it just "foam," as Song herself had once rather eloquently dismissed it? Maybe love conquers all, but it was hard enough when you were in the same zip code and spoke the same language and were closer in age. I was twenty years older than she was and I had told her this made me "jin zhang," a little nervous. But she'd only smiled and shook her head at me. "I don't mind it," she said. "I mind feeling!"

Now, Song looked at me a long moment. "I believe feeling, are you?" she asked.

"Yes, I believe, too," I assured her. But did I? Where could this possibly go?

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"What time you come to Qingdao," Song asked. "I anxious for you come Qingdao."

I told her I would come sometime soon, but when she pressed for the exact month, I found myself squirming. I mumbled something about how busy I was, it would have to wait until after the summer, and then I was supposed to teach in the fall. I could see her face cloud over. She looked directly into the camera and said, "Don't you say lie?"



I was taken aback. "No, no lie!" I said. "I'm serious, I'll come." But I looked away and, stalling for time, reached over to turn up some catchy rock playing on morning FM. "Like this?" I asked.

Over the last months, Song and I had talked a lot about music, our likes and dislikes. She tried playing some of her favorite Canton songs for me, and I put on some B.B. King and Billie Holiday for her. But the sound quality was awful over our web connection, and I'm sure we were both just being polite in our mumbled "hen haos," very good, very good.

But now I could see she had her eyes closed and was nodding her head to the beat. Then I asked her if she liked to dance. I could see her face light up with a beautiful, playful smile. "Yes! Tai bang le," it's great, she said. We stared at each other over our seven-thousand-mile apart webcams. "If I come to Qingdao, would you dance with me?" I asked. Song reached her hand toward the camera as if to stroke my face. "I very happy waiting you," she said softly. That was it. I made a note to call the travel agent a friend had recommended. I knew I had fallen into the "ai he," the love river, for Song; and I would swim all the way there if I had to.