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Chinese Language Class
National Taitung University Chinese Teaching and Study Center

I. Interest in Chinese Teaching and Study Center

When I arrived in Taitung on an English teaching grant, I knew I wanted to seek out an Chinese language center to enhance my Chinese language study. I knew I would have plenty of opportunities to practice my oral Chinese with colleagues and friends, but I wanted some extra practice with reading and writing Chinese articles. I also wanted to practice having advanced conversations about topics like politics and the global economy with a teacher in Chinese, something I wouldn't be able to do chatting up a friend or neighbor. Next year I will attend graduate school at an American program in Nanjing, China where all of the course content and assignments will be in simplified Chinese. With this knowledge in mind, I was looking to get some practice reading, writing, and discussing academic Chinese in order to prepare for my time at graduate school. Chinese classes typically don't cover this kind of curriculum, so I was excited to learn that our teacher was a graduate student herself well-versed in the art of article writing. She has been really helpful.

The best part about Taitung University Chinese Teaching and Study Center is that classes are highly personalized to each students' individual need. Before I began class with Ms. Fang, she scheduled a Skype interview with my classmate Grace and me in order to learn exactly what kind of class would suit us. We informed her that we would like to focus on articles and have all of our material in simplified Chinese, which she willingly agreed to. This felt like a really kind gesture on her part because she is Taiwanese and typically classes in Taiwan are conducted in traditional characters. Additionally, Ms. Fang was more than happy to research and provide all the material for class herself instead of rely on a textbook. This is a really big deal because she is a hopelessly busy graduate student who teaches many hours a week and is in the midst of writing her own thesis. Still, she takes the time to diligently plan each lesson and prepare articles custom-tailored to our learning needs. Such dedication is rare for a teacher, I believe. We began classes in October and have continued with them for the entire year we have been in Taiwan because we are so happy with all the things our teacher has taught us, not just about grammar and syntax, but also about Taiwanese politics, life, and culture.

II. Class Structure

Our teacher, Ms. Fang, uses a variety of creative teaching methods to make sure the lesson is best suited to Grace's and my needs. Initially, we started out reading pieces of literature in Mandarin--these were mostly heartwarming stories that touted classical values like love, friendship, and the importance of family. These articles were great because they taught us how to talk about the human experience in Chinese, as well as expanded our vocabularies. After this, we began to focus on difficult articles about Chinese politics, the future of North Korea, and

China's homeless population. These articles are dense, difficult to read, and even more difficult to understand, but Ms. Fang helps us learn the words and discuss the content. Because of her, I feel way more prepared to begin graduate school in China. She also has done fun activities with us, like laying out a set of vocabulary words and asking us to use them to write an article. She also had us cut up newspaper articles and use the words to make sentences. It was both very fun and challenged us more than I expected.

Our learning also occasionally goes outside of the classroom. During the Lantern Festival in early March, Ms. Fang took us to watch *jia han dan*, or watch people be pelted with firecrackers to atone for their sins and garner good luck for others. This is an extreme thing to watch because crowds gather around, the air is filled with smoke from all the explosions, and the individual in the middle is suffering through it all. Even though Lantern Festival is celebrated in Taiwan and China, the special festival is unique to Taitung, Taiwan. It was invaluable for a Taiwanese person, our teacher, to take us to this event and explain the historical and social significance of everything we were watching. It was a great opportunity to learn advanced and slightly obscure Chinese vocabulary in context.

Furthermore, every now and then we go out to dinner with our teacher to local restaurants. This has been a great way to discover great food in Taitung and practice reading menus. It also gives us the chance to chat casually, which has helped our Chinese levels a lot. Our relationship feels much more like a friendship than a typical student / teacher relationship, so we usually call her Dolly.

III. Benefits of Class

Taking this class has helped my Chinese level improve a lot. The most important area I have improved in is character recognition. Previously my Chinese strength lay primarily in speaking. I could talk to just about anyone on the street about just about any topic. However, my written Chinese was not as strong. My Chinese teacher in college emphasized speaking over everything else, and reasoned that it was enough if we knew how to type words. Dolly has helped me learn to read and recognize a lot of characters, as well as how to identify radicals to remember how to write words.

My favorite part of class is the in depth conversations we have in Mandarin about important issues like 1) North Korea's nuclear proliferation, 2) the future stability of Taiwan, 3) China's One Belt One Road economic and soft power policy, 4) censorship in China, and 5) China and Taiwan's homeless and overlooked populations. These topics are just a few that I can name off the top of my head. Dolly has taught me to use advanced mandarin to discuss real world issues that are highly relevant.

IV. Suggestions

I really don't have much to suggest, as I think Dolly is an excellent teacher and the whole department at the Chinese Teaching and Study Center has been nothing but kind, welcoming, and supportive. I believe the center should get in touch with Elaine Li at Fulbright (eli@fulbright.org.tw) and invite future ETAs (English Teaching Assistants) like myself to join the Center to study Chinese.