

Little did I imagine when I walked into Chinese class my sophomore year of high school that only three years later I would be standing inside an airport in Changsha, Hunan, China, saying an emotional goodbye to some of the greatest people I had ever met. But that's exactly what happened. The summer after I graduated from high school, I was offered the opportunity to go on a trip to China for two months, working as an intern at China National Hybrid Rice Research and Development Center. Coming from a low-income family, something as expensive as going to China for two months never seemed within my reach. However, this internship was unique in that it was paid for entirely by the World Food Prize Foundation. In order to be accepted, I had to undertake an extensive application process, which included driving down to Des Moines for a face-to-face interview. I met many of the other applicants while I was there, and all of them seemed so intelligent and accomplished. I wondered whether I could measure up to any of them, and when I received a letter in the mail from the World Food Prize, I was sure that it was telling me that I hadn't been accepted. However, when I opened it, the news was the exact opposite. The letter didn't say the specifics of why I had been accepted into the program, but to this day I believe it was because of my Chinese language skills. During my interview with representatives of the foundation, my interviewers had been very interested in my 3 years of Chinese language experience at Central and my knowledge of Chinese culture. I still believe that, amongst the many other qualified and high-achieving students being interviewed, I was selected because I had a knowledge of Chinese language, and would be able to relate to my co-workers and the community where I would be living.

My two months in China were some of the best experiences of my life. I met students from the local university during my internship, and they took me under their wing and introduced me to Chinese youth culture. I also had a close friendship with my supervisor at the research center, Kuang Feiting. On the weekends, when we weren't in the lab and I was free to travel, Feiting took me out of the city of Changsha to see other places and broaden my experience of Chinese culture. We went to the large, crowded city of Guangzhou. We went to the Hunan countryside for a family funeral which Feiting's boyfriend had invited us both to attend. We went to the city of Shenzhen, across the water from Hong Kong, and visited the jewelry and silver markets there. Above all, my favorite experience of my trip was when Feiting invited me to her parents' home for the weekend. Her mother and father cooked Feiting's favorite dish for us, freshwater snails. We ended the visit by touring the house that Feiting's parents were building for their retirement. At the end of the tour, Feiting's mother told me that if I ever came back to China, I would be welcome to return and visit Feiting at their new house. When I finally said goodbye to Feiting and my other friends at the airport, I was sad to leave the place and people that I'd started to know so well.

After my experience in China, I was even more motivated to continue my study of Chinese in college. So far, I've taken two years of Chinese language credit at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. Outside of the classroom, I continue to visit Boston's Chinatown to eat Chinese cuisine and apply my studies of Chinese in a real-world setting. Five years ago, just entering my sophomore year of high school, I couldn't have imagined for myself all of the things I've been able to experience. If I hadn't chosen to learn Chinese, I don't know where I would be today. Learning a foreign language has taken me to places I never thought I could reach, and that is why it will be a part of me that I will always treasure.