

## Hotel Beijing

By Andrew Wang

In Beijing, clean tap water is something heard of only in mythology. The skies are, on a good day, a little smoggy with a rare chance of blue sky, but the humidity never yields. Tons of people, who are for the most part unsanitary, pervade the streets. Beijing is definitely not the suburban, easy-to-commute, sunny-skied setting I'm used to in Orinda, California. Although I suppressed these complaints in the presence of my two Chinese roommates, I secretly yearned for my spoiled upbringing.

In a crowded, damp room filled with some hundred or so students, only five were foreigners, meaning Americans, myself included. Being one of the foreigners, I felt a sense of pride and superiority knowing that my English was likely better than the majority of the students'. Then the teacher walked in and announced, "We will teach this class predominantly in Mandarin." My pride and sense of superiority sunk along with my heart.

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As I dozed off, my mom popped through the door and announced that I should do something productive this summer, particularly stressing a need to prepare for the SAT before my junior year. My lethargic mood abandoned me; I shot up, outraged: "I'm staying in America?"

"No," my mom replied bluntly.

I sighed in relief, only to then realize the implications: my mom was suggesting that I take SAT classes in China. Apparently, she had already planned it all without my permission -- not that my permission would have altered her decision.

“Is it going to be taught in English or Mandarin?” I asked.

“I would assume English, but I’m not sure,” she answered.

“Is it like an American program based in China or something?”

“No, it’s a Chinese program for kids wanting to attend college in America.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

I saw absolutely no purpose in taking classes in a country whose dominant language was not even that of the SATs. It seemed counterintuitive, and it took relentless pressure from my mother before I reluctantly conceded to taking the classes. I thought I would only waste my vacation in China by taking classes, but, feeling guilty because of my mother’s disappointment, I bowed my head in defeat.

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Living with my two roommates illustrated a significant barrier for people trying to learn a second language, particularly when the languages are extremely different from each other. Especially because this was a program designed to help students pass the SAT, and not necessarily help them successfully integrate into American society, students learned words that were beyond excessive. For example, my roommate once told me he felt “mirthful”. At first, I had no idea what he meant. When I looked it up in a dictionary, I promptly informed him that “happy” is sufficient enough. Chinese students concentrated on memorizing book loads of vocabulary as a foundation to learning English. It may be very useful in writing essays, but functioning in society would be an entirely different and more difficult hurdle to clear. I was amazed at how much they knew, but I was confused by how they talked.

One time, we decided to eat at a street restaurant that served a wide variety of foods, most of which I have never seen in my life time. Of the things we ordered, many of which I never

knew existed or could exist as a food, pig's blood was on the list. At first, when they announced it in Mandarin, I assumed they meant a different word other than actual blood. To my surprise, blood can actually be hardened into a solid form and then consumed. To my dismay, my friends urged me to sample what is, apparently, a local delicacy. Unfortunately, my stomach disagreed with the delicacy, and diarrhea set in.

A couple days into the program, a few of the students scouted out the surroundings of the hotel to find more suitable areas to socialize. The exploration turned out a success as they discovered a nearby university along with many street restaurants and shops. Particularly prized was the finding of the university, which was equipped with sporting facilities.

I was clearly distinguishable among my peers as the American. My Mandarin proficiency level matched that of a third grader's, but through years of continued practice within my family, my skill level had risen to a middle school student's. I remember frantically gesturing with my arms when I did not know how to translate an English word that my roommates didn't understand. And conversely, which was more often the case, when I had absolutely no idea what a Chinese word or phrase meant, minutes flew by as they tried enlightening me of my cultural language.

On the way to where the classes would take place, I found out that the entire SAT program would be held in a hotel and that I'd be living there for the duration of the program. For a moment, I felt that this experience was going to be fine, considering the comforts of a hotel. The thought of living apart from my family with other students sent tingles down my spine. As I entered the hotel, however, the tingles dissipated. On further inspection, I discovered I would have to hand-wash my clothes because the hotel had no laundry room. Badly stained carpets bore a pungent aroma that permeated the environment. Hanging appliances like air conditioners, fans,

and lights were on the verge of falling off. The furniture seemed like it would break down at any moment. The peeling walls offered a wide spectrum of bland colors. Questionable, murky bathrooms prevented me from being at ease while relieving myself. All in all, the hotel deserved its two-star status.

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Sunlight crawled onto the furniture as I sank into my California office chair, staring at the computer screen and trying to burn time away. The calendar on the wall taunted me and reminded me of the last few endless weeks of school. Sitting in the family office room, I tilted my head back, eyes closed, and hoped sleep would overtake me. Summer inched closer and closer at an exponentially slow rate. I counted down the minutes until leaving for Beijing.

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When the day was done, but not quite done, in the little gap of time before supper, around ten to twelve students would gather together in front of the hotel's entrance. The reason: balling on the university's outdoor basketball courts. Our games supplied the sole reason for struggling through those gruesome hours of class, the sole means of turning mental acuity into physical activity, the sole motive for maintaining consciousness after classes had exhausted our minds. Over the course of the next few hours, sweat streamed down our shirts, muscles built up lactic acid, and friendships and rivalries developed.