

# Dreaming in Chinese

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Dreaming in Chinese: Mandarin Lessons in Life, Love, and Language by Deborah Fallows Walker and Company 208 pp., \$22

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It was in the book of Exodus, in the King James Version of the Bible, that Moses first called himself a “stranger in a strange land.” From then on up through Robert A. Heinlein’s 1961 novel of the same phrase, the “stranger in a strange land” genre has been (and remains) a staple of song, film, and literature. It seems that a sense of cultural disconnect has long plagued – and fascinated – humankind.

And if you are a Westerner, where better to explore that disconnect than in China? Ever since the *fin de siècle* socialist capitalism that opened China, Westerners have flocked there and done their best to make sense of the ex-pat experience. Linguist Deborah Fallows becomes one of the latest with **Dreaming in Chinese: Mandarin Lessons in Life, Love, and Language**, an oddly hybrid mix of memoir, history, and cultural study.

Fallows and her husband, The Atlantic’s national correspondent James Fallows, are seasoned ex-pats; Fallows’s introduction describes the “pattern of [their] life” as “alternating several years at home in Washington D.C., with several years out exploring the world.” Their first visit to China – recalled merely as “snapshots” – occurred briefly in 1986 while the family (with two then-small children) spent four years living in Japan and Southeast Asia.

Almost a quarter-century later, the couple returned to China when James accepted a three-year Atlantic gig. In spite of Deborah Fallows’s linguistic training and predeparture language classes, “Our entry to China was rough,” she confesses. “I could not recognize or utter a single word of the Chinese ... and I even wondered if my teacher had been teaching us Cantonese instead of Mandarin.” (Fallows is careful to explain that “Chinese” is “technically a broader term that covers the family of many different languages and dialects of China.” As Mandarin is China’s official language, she uses the terms “Mandarin” and “Chinese” interchangeably.)

Fallows, of course, tenaciously progresses. In 14 chapters – each titled with a Chinese phrase, its English translation, and a summary remark about said phrase – Fallows charts how the Chinese language “became [her] way of making some sense of China.” In “1. Wo ài ni! I love you! The grammar of romance,” Fallows muses that “[m]aybe love is a metaphor for much that is now unfolding and changing in China.” She offers disparate glimpses of the street vendor attracting foreign customers by yelling “I love you!,” the friend who confesses she loves her husband “for now,” and contrasts the commonplace public displays of affection in Beijing’s Yuyuantan Park to the parents who wander Shanghai People’s Park advertising their grown children’s

virtues on homemade signs in hopes of arranging marriage.

In “2. When rude is polite,” Fallows observes how bluntness is actually a sign of closeness and intimacy; her overuse of “pleases” and “thank-yous” in China – expected in the West – actually emphasizes social distance.

In the humorously self-deprecating “3. Language play as a national sport,” Fallows presents the complications of Chinese tones – the greatest challenge for non-Chinese speakers to master. With mischievous delight, she cites the legendary story “The Lion-Eating Poet in the Stone Den,” comprised of “92 repetitions of the syllable shi.” Fallows gleefully notes, “Discovering [writer Chao Yuen Ren’s] story was vindication for me: I always had the impression that Chinese ‘all sounds the same,’ and here was proof!”

Fallows finds that her best teachers are the laobaixing – “common folk, ordinary people, the average Chinese Joe.” She learns that to be a “real person in China requires having a cellphone and a Chinese name”; Fallows is baptized Fang Jie Bi, or “to borrow a pen,” a name she duly abandons.

Unquestionably, “Dreaming In Chinese” is a treasure-trove of clever party-ready tidbits. Did you know that... the Chinese pronoun for ‘she’ is a relatively recent concept that began in the 1920s?... that Mao’s thick Hunan accent ironically made him incomprehensible to most of the Chinese masses?

And yet Fallows’s cleverness inadvertently does herself an injustice. While her writing is certainly not without insight, reading “Dreaming in Chinese” is somewhat akin to finishing a nutty candy bar – just enough protein to temporarily stanch hunger, but alas, not enough to be filling. Fallows leaves readers wanting to know more about her – at least enough to avoid jarring narrative jumps. For example, while “home” is Shanghai in the introduction, the first chapter jumps to “home” in Beijing without any explanation of when or why the move.

Beyond merely pithy observations more fitting for a Sunday newspaper column, Fallows’s three years in China prove a blur. Perhaps that was the intention, but presented without a more cohesive narrative arc to bind the pieces together, “Dreaming in Chinese” regrettably lacks the depth to be a lasting read.

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