



By Marina Han

Screeeech. I cringe as the metal chair echoes throughout the room. I slowly plop down into the chair and my eyes cautiously sweep across the small space. Everything is white—the ceiling, the floor, the walls, and the tables. I count eleven other kids, and the majority of them are younger than me which is a bit embarrassing. I've chosen to sit at a table separate from everybody else, while the other students are sitting with at least one other kid.

I remind myself that I want to attend this class. I haven't taken an out-of-school Chinese class in two years, and I've decided to do it again. I still clearly remember why I quit: I didn't want to embrace my home culture. I didn't want to learn more about China, the country my ancestors came from. 'I live in the U.S.,' I remember thinking to myself. 'There's no need to learn Chinese.'

But now I deeply regret taking such a long break from learning Chinese. I need to welcome this amazing culture and take it all in. I'm actually excited to learn more. However, I'm also really scared that I'll make many mistakes in this class. Since moving away from learning Chinese for so long, I fear that I won't do as well as the others and that I'll fail.

I look up and see a woman who looks like she's in her mid-50s and wearing a lot of make-up.

"Hello, students!" she exclaims in Chinese, flipping her black hair over her shoulder. "Today, we have a new student in our Chinese class. Marina, would you like to introduce yourself?"

I start talking in English but the teacher interrupts and tells me to introduce myself in Chinese, so I start over. I tell the class that I'm in seventh grade and that I'm twelve years old. "I'm Mrs. Li and we're all glad you're here," she says after I finish.

As soon as everybody else introduces themselves, we start the lesson. My heart skips in happiness as I open my Chinese textbook. But once I see what's in it, my face immediately falls. There are millions of Mandarin characters all over the thin pages, and as I skim through the first page, I realize I only know half of the words. Half? How am I even going to survive this class?

Mrs. Li reads the story in the first few pages. I notice how the words just flood out of her mouth. It seems as if she's not putting any effort into speaking Chinese.

Next, the students take turns reading the story. I admire how they speak so well. They sometimes miss a few phrases, but besides that, they speak almost fluently. 'This is why I'm here,' I think. I really want to speak like these people. I want to be able to talk to my parents and grandparents fluently in Chinese. Most of all, I want to embrace my Chinese culture. But at the same time, I have this big fear of failing. What if I don't read well when my turn comes up? I don't want to make any mistakes, but I probably will.

Unfortunately, just like I predicted, when it's my turn to read I stumble through the entire thing. Every ten seconds or so, I stop before a phrase I don't know and wait until Mrs. Li tells me what it is. The whole time, I feel the students' eyes are staring at me. There are so many phrases I don't know at all.

I shake my head. If I just didn't quit two years back, I would've made so much progress in my speaking. But now I've forgotten so many things I used to know. Mrs. Li walks to the front of the whiteboard. She tells us that we're going to play a game in which she writes down phrases that we had trouble with before, and we will tell her what they are. What? I don't remember any of the phrases that I needed help on before.

Mrs. Li writes down "银行." Before I can even process the phrase, a boy behind me gets the answer correct. I don't even understand how he answered it so fast. After five minutes or so of the game, I still haven't raised my hand. I watch Mrs. Li write "开." As soon as she finishes writing it down, I know that I have no clue as to what the phrase is.

"Marina, can you tell us what this is?" she asks me, looking at me straight in the eye. I feel like she's staring into my soul, which makes me fidget with my sweaty hands.

"Uhhh," I mutter. "Kāi... kāi...?"

Mrs. Li looks disappointed. "It's 'kāi lǎng'." I sink into my seat, my feet sliding against the shiny floor.

After a few more minutes of still not answering, I finally know the phrase on the whiteboard, and I raise my hand. Mrs. Li's face lights up when she spots me. "Liào tiān." I confidently speak after being called on.

But to my disbelief, the teacher tells me I'm wrong. "Close. It's 'liáo tiān'." My body slumps. What? I really thought I would get that right.

Gosh, I'm so much worse at Chinese than I thought I would be. My regret of quitting Chinese class is digging deeper into my heart. I wish I could turn back time and go back to prevent myself from making that decision.

Tears flood my eyes, making everything blurry. 'Please, no,' I think. I can't cry in front of my peers. I take deep breaths and after what feels like a decade, I'm finally able to force my tears back down so that nothing pours out of my eyes.

I heave a big sigh. I know that I'm struggling. I know that I'm making many mistakes. I also know that I'm not going to quit again. Quitting in the past was one of my worst decisions. It's going to take a long time to fully learn Chinese, and it's going to be a lot of work. But in the end, it's going to be worth it. I'm willing to go through these obstacles to reach my goal.

I grin. I'm proud of myself; it's not easy to start all over again. But I will do whatever it takes to learn about myself and my culture. No matter how many times I fail, I will pick myself up again and keep on trying.

So, I roll my shoulders, straighten my back, and focus on the game. It's time for a new start.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marina Han is 12 years old and lives in Solon, Ohio. She likes to learn about new things and spend time with her family and friends. She also enjoys playing the violin and piano. But most importantly, she loves to read and write stories. Marina has an outgoing personality and is always there to help others.