My Path to Championship

By Charlie Hoffs

I recently won the Chinese Bridge International Chinese Language Competition.

It was the most wild, exhausting, exciting experience of my life. The adventure began once I set foot in our Beijing hotel. Looking around, I saw people of all shapes, sizes, and colors arriving from around the world. They were speaking every language from Afrikaans to Japanese, wearing their traditional national clothing and bearing their flags proudly. Everyone was excited to meet everyone—there were no borders. Students from Brazil and Mozambique were happily exchanging contact information in their shared language, Portuguese. The Latvians were handing out little chocolates, and the Australians were giving out kangaroo pins. I was talking to Stino and Bertram from the Republic of Congo; they shared stories about their country, their family, their lives.

There were students and teachers from 96 countries, totaling 106 teams. We all had something in common: we all spoke Chinese.

The following days in Beijing, we explored the Forbidden City, the Great Wall, the Summer Palace, and ate delicious food along the way. The other Americans and I carried our flag wherever we went, singing our anthem.
at the top of the Great Wall and taking pictures with excited strangers. As we walked through the Emperor’s ancient summer residence, I spoke Spanish with the delegates of Colombia, Peru, Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Argentina.

Then we flew to Kunming, and Round 1 of the competition began. Day 1 was the written test, assessing our knowledge of ancient Chinese culture and our ability to read Mandarin. I was a little rusty on my Chinese history—I got a 74%. The next day, my partner Kaylee and I gave our speeches. We included a little skit we had written several days prior (the whole audience laughed when we mentioned Jay Chou, a viral Taiwanese star!) The last day of Round 1 featured a talent performance. Kaylee played a beautiful song on the Gu Zheng (古筝) and amazed the judges. I rapped an original rap I wrote in Chinese, blinged-out in chains and a gangsta hat. The reporters swarmed us. We found our faces all over the news that night.

The judges announced the results: we made it to Round 2 and the Top Twenty!

And the competition was the next day. Kaylee and I stayed up all night memorizing ancient Chinese proverbs and Li Bai poetry. We survived on Oolong Tea and strong sense of determination to make our country proud. The next day, we failed the poetry contest. Fortunately, there was an improvised skit section and we thought of a funny idea on the spot. We cracked ourselves up—and apparently the judges too. They promoted us to the next round: Top Ten.

The Top Ten competitions were “Amazing Race” style. The first contest was competitive flower arranging. We rushed through the Dounan Flower Market, grabbing the prettiest flowers and hustling to create a culturally significant bouquet. The next contest involved visiting a local pharmaceutical factory, and memorizing words like “针灸 (acupuncture)” and “黄帝内经” (the founding book of Chinese traditional medicine). The last contest was a tea ceremony. Kaylee and I delivered speeches on the significance of tea culture to the Chinese national identity.
And we moved on to Top Five! Now, the remaining countries were ourselves (USA), Mozambique, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Australia. We had rehearsals for nine hours every day, practicing for the final, nationally-aired performance. Our task was to perform modern interpretations of the traditional Beijing Opera play, Romance of the Three Kingdoms. I played Zhang Fei, the military commander and iconic macho-man hero. I spoke in my deepest voice and over-acted as much as possible.

I cannot overstate the pomp and circumstance of the final performance. Hundreds of the students flooded the stage, dancing and singing alongside fan dancers and glittering acrobats. The other top five contestants and I ran into the spotlight, posed, smiled hysterically, and waved to the judges. We were Chinese TV stars.

Our play made the judges howl with laughter. They promoted USA, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan to the Top Three! Now it was time for Kaylee and I to deliver our final speech.

I began, “一座‘桥’是这个比赛最好的象征。” “The ‘bridge’ is a perfect metaphor for this experience.”

The water flowing under the bridge represents the differences between our cultures and the distances between our countries. The Chinese Bridge (Chinese Bridge) bridges this river and brings us all together. I thanked the Confucius Institute, my teachers, my teammate, and my mom, and asked the audience to join me in grateful applause.

And we won. WE WON! Kaylee and I earned four-year full-ride scholarships to the Chinese university of our choice.

The greatest reward, however, was the experience itself. As we joined our friends on the victorious bus back to the hotel, everyone sang “Party in the USA” together.