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Anyone who has ever learnt a language will tell you how difficult it can be. This is particularly true for Westerners trying to learn Asian languages (even the Chinese proudly acknowledge how difficult their language is to master). The main reasons are:

1. The Chinese language does not have an alphabet, rather it uses a 'logographic' system. In such a system the symbols represent words. They are not made up of separate letters, such as our alphabet.

2. Phonology: Unlike English, Chinese is a 'tone' language. The pitch of a person's voice distinguishes the meaning of the word. In English changes in pitch express emotion. Most people who have learnt a foreign language believe that learning the language through immersion is the best method. This is the best reason for anyone to study Chinese abroad.

If you have decided you want to study Chinese abroad, where do you start? There are so many language schools and universities that offer such courses that it is little wonder that the prospective student can be baffled. Helpfully, nextstepchina.org provides the names of some universities that offer these courses in both Beijing and Shanghai.

In Beijing, Tsinghua University has forged an impressive reputation. It is regarded as China's MIT. Meanwhile Shanghai's Jiao Tong University is one of the oldest universities in the country. It is also well known for its links with other universities and colleges around the world, and therefore is popular with international students who want to study in China.

It goes without saying that the main benefit when you study Chinese abroad is the opportunity to study China itself and learn about its rich history and culture. Naturally, it gives you a great chance to see the attractions for which the country is internationally famous. However, some of the lesser known, but equally impressive attractions, include the Tian Tan Buddha. This seated Buddha weighs an incredible 202 tonnes. Ocean Park in Hong Kong is widely regarded as the best theme park in China. This may be partly due to the fact that it is home to four giant pandas.

Clearly, there are many great reasons to study Chinese abroad. However, it is natural to be hesitant about visiting another culture, especially one that is so different to your own. This is why websites such as nextstepchina.org exist. They provide a fantastic resource that link you to services and educational institutions so that living and studying in China becomes a much easier experience.

For college students these universities are especially valuable as they can often provide you with credits towards your college course. For example, if you were to study Beijing Language and Culture University's one month program you would receive up to six college credits.

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