Title: Nine essential phrases to get by in Xishuangbanna – Sam Herniman

It’s amazing how few phrases one needs to get by in a foreign country.

Below is a list of nine phrases (in order of importance) I learnt in my initial weeks of being in China. Without these, I would be lost.

1. Wǒ yào – I want – 我要

I didn’t need to learn hello, please or thank you until much later. As phrases go, being able to ask for something is more important than anything.

1. Wǒ tīng bù dǒng – I don’t understand (literally: I hear, no understand) – 我听不懂

When I am successful in saying something in Mandarin people sometimes assume I can speak fluently. Wǒ tīng bù dǒng is often the phrase I utter when I am met with a new word. People sometimes laugh when I say it. I hope there is some unknown joke hidden in the language and they aren’t laughing at me.

1. Cèsuǒ zài nǎlǐ – Where is the bathroom? –厕所在哪里

This one came in handy when I had food poisoning.

1. Qǐng gěi wǒ – Please give me… – 请给我

The polite way to get things

1. Wǒ bù zhīdào – I don’t know –我不知道

I use this one a lot

1. Duìbùqǐ – I’m sorry – 对不起

I use this one a lot too.

1. Xièxiè – Thank you – 谢谢

In the west, we say thank you for almost anything and to anyone. In China friends don’t say it to each other. If you say it to your friend they sometimes interpret it as you being uncomfortable around them.

1. Ní hǎo – Hello – 您好

This is the first two words of Ní hǎo ma – *How are you?* In China one rarely asks how someone is.

1. Ní chī le ma – Have you eaten? – 你吃了吗

The Chinese equivalent of *how are you?* People say it when they greet each other and it comes from the food centric culture. The answer is usually unimportant as it is not an invitation to eat something.

With these phrases I have been able to survive but not carry on a conversation. It is exciting to get to this point but I have so much more to learn!