Language on the mountain

It is amazing how much Chinese one can learn when stuck up a mountain with a team of only Mandarin speakers.

In my second or third week of residence in Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanic Garden I started helping the orchid group plant Dendrobia in the Green Stone Forest which is essentially a very rocky slope with a forest on it. The process involves sticking sphagnum moss on tree trunks with cling film, then injecting the orchid seed (a white fluid-like watery mayonnaise) into the moss with an hypodermic syringe. It is a two man job with one person holding the moss in place and the other wrapping with cling film and one person injecting while the other fills the syringes. This is all done while making sure not to let the glass jar which holds the seed roll down the slope – a crime which ends the day of fieldwork. The moss is only used in the dry season so that moisture is retained under the cling film for long enough for the seeds to germinate.

As the only people to work with spoke very little English, I was forced to try out my meager Mandarin Chinese. The number of words I actually learnt was relatively low, however my confidence in communication felt a significant boost.

My mum used to tell me I was unable to multitask but learning a language while learning to plant orchids is easy.

Sam Herniman