

How to act like you know Chinese even though you don't, episode 2

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My brother-in-law told me that in college he was hanging out with his friends, one of whom was Korean. The Korean friend said, “Hey, y’know, I actually speak some Chinese.”

His friend demonstrated by raising his arm and pointing vaguely forward, shaking his hand slightly, and saying “Nugga nugga nugga nugga nugga...”

This is hilarious if you speak Mandarin, because what he’s saying is “那個那個那個那個那個...”

The word “那個” literally means “that” in the sense of “that object over there.” But in Mandarin Chinese, it is a common filler word, used to stall for time while you hunt for the correct word. As with many other languages, a hand gesture often accompanies the use of the filler word.

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