

Our topic is how and why learning Chinese well has helped us in our careers. Not the importance of learning the language per se, but the importance of learning the language well. So let's first define what we mean by "learning Chinese well".

My Link-ian answer is twofold: tones and Wittgenstein.

Tones are so important, and their importance so obvious, that I won't dwell on them. If you want to speak Chinese well and give Chinese people the sense that they can truly talk to you then tones are essential. Tones, and proper pronunciation in general – “考试的考” is not the same sound as “moo cow 的 cow”, and so on. Those of us who have made the effort know the reaction, the look on the face, the palpable sense of relaxation and opening that follows when you have demonstrated that speaking with you will not be a stressful experience for them.

About Wittgenstein.

One of the most rewarding educational experiences of my life was taking first year Chinese at Middlebury Summer Language School with Perry and three outstanding assistants. One thing that made it special for me was that I was at the time a philosophy major quite enthralled with the late Wittgenstein – the Philosophical Investigations – and I discovered that Perry had been a philosophy major as an undergraduate. I recall several conversations with him during the summer which were extremely helpful to me and reinforced my belief, still deeply cherished, that knowing Wittgenstein is a great help in learning Chinese. Thanks to those studies I had already shed the common misconception that the world is full of 'things' – which can include colors, sounds, actions, emotions, and so on – just like the easily distinguishable elements in the periodic table, and that languages apply labels to that finite group of things. If that were the case learning a new language would simply be a matter of learning a new set of labels.

Understanding clearly that this is not what languages do is essential for learning Chinese well. You avoid the trap of asking “how do you say 'X' in Chinese”. You instead try to learn what Chinese people say in those situations, to absorb, to learn to respond to different situations with the same linguistic behavior. Sooner or later every serious student of Chinese must come to terms with this. I had the advantage from the start of Wittgenstein and Wittgenstein-cognizant Link. Thinking in English and translating into Chinese never produces real Chinese. It is impossible to avoid this, but it is the effort to avoid it that is key. That requires a constant effort, consciousness, self-awareness.

An example picked at random is the two Chinese words “lao” and “jiu” which both are used in situations where an English speaker would say use the word 'old', but which have different 'meanings'. As I have come to appreciate more and more over time, “Lao” is a wonderful word. It means old in some uses, but it also can mean always, or sincere, or secure. To understand 老 and 旧 you need to think differently about the world – if you are simply thinking the English word 'old' when you hear either you are missing something important. The word 'Lao' came up early on when I translated Dai Qing's story “Pan” for Perry's anthology of contemporary fiction, and the narrator refers to her husband throughout as “Lao Chen”. I first suggested translating that as “Old Chen” but Perry quite rightly pointed out that literally translating the word would totally mislead the readers regarding the actual meaning, and we just used 'Chen'.

I am also remembering my first day in Taiwan after doing ernianji at Princeton, coming to a small restaurant and ordering a coke which I said to them was “too warm”, which of course in my Chinese was “太暖和”. Sensing their bewilderment I added a helpful suggestion: 有没有凉快一点的? Now the bewilderment was absolute. Later, when I realized what had happened, it occurred to me that you really cannot and would not say “this drink is too warm” in Chinese – correct me if I am wrong, please! You can express the wish that you had a colder drink, but if you are thinking “too warm” and you are translating into Chinese you are lost from the start.

There are two important related questions: can you understand spoken Chinese well without speaking it well? The Link-Wittgenstein view, to which I fully subscribe, is clear; no way. You only understand a language if you can use it yourself. Understanding equals the ability to use it. This statement may seem obvious – how can you really understand why someone uses one word instead of another, if you cannot make the same decision yourself when speaking? But I suspect many people will instinctively object to this notion and insist that understanding what Chinese people are saying is easier than speaking fluently in Chinese yourself.

A related question is: can you understand written Chinese without speaking it well? This is a somewhat more complicated question because there were so many generations of Western scholars who worked on classical Chinese texts, some of whom lived in China but some of whom, such as Arthur Waley, never did. There are also technical terms in Chinese that are direct translations of foreign words. Understanding narrow technical texts might be relatively straightforward. But here too it seems to me that the unavoidable answer is ‘no’. In the end these distinctions between speaking Chinese, understanding spoken Chinese, and understanding written Chinese are artificial and downright misleading. To understand Chinese you need to know Chinese well.

I’ve had two careers in China and have spent many years working in other countries as well. Learning Chinese well helped me in all of these activities. My first career was in China tourism. When China opened to foreign tourism after Mao’s death I got actively involved with a company called Lindblad Travel, first leading tours for them, then working on their Yangtse River cruise boat, the M.S. Kunlun, and then for three years as their Vice President for China and the Orient.

Speaking Chinese well was enormously helpful in my tourism work. During those delicate early years of the reform and opening up era being able to communicate clearly, being someone that people could understand, and enjoy talking to, was a big deal. As a tour leader and cruiseboard representative at a time when rules and restrictions were still quite inchoate I could overcome barriers of uncertainty and mistrust. I was not just another foreigner. The number who could speak Chinese well was very, very small. Tones were hugely important in this; without getting the tones right it was impossible to put people fully at ease. A foreigner who actually sounded Chinese, both in tones and in language usage, had a huge advantage. This helped me time and again as I had to explain the utterly inexplicable requests and expectations of Western tourists to guides, service staff and others, and also to help the tourists understand and respect what they were experiencing.

There are so many examples I could cite. In 1980 the MS Kunlun docked at Jiujiang, in Jiangxi Province, and we took minibuses –面包车 is so much better a term – up to visit Lushan. Two very elderly ladies in the group, one an Aunt of the Australian Prime Minister (perhaps the real reason for the special treatment) were given a separate car to ride in, to be more comfortable. When our bus came around a

turn we found that the ladies' car had flipped over on the side of the road. Both ladies were alive, conscious, without any life-threatening injuries. But both were in a lot of pain and clearly needed urgent medical treatment. That might be relatively easy to obtain in Jiujiang now, but it was not then. They were taken to a military hospital, and I stayed behind with them while the boat continued to cruise up the Changjiang. We stayed two days in Jiujiang while I was the only bilingual English-Chinese person within miles, it seemed. The hospital simply was not equipped in any way to provide service even close to what their patients were used to, and I hardly slept for those two days, being available at all times for the ladies, for the hospital personnel, and for the two CITS colleagues who also stayed behind with us, neither of whom spoke English. In the end after considerable difficulty we were able to diagnose their injuries and then made the decision to get them to Hong Kong asap, which entailed a flight to Nanchang on a 30's era biplane with military markings, a second charter flight to Guangzhou in another small plane, and then putting the ladies on a flight to Hong Kong. It should be clear how big a role my Chinese language ability played throughout this, not least in making sure that the two ladies felt that someone who understood them was communicating with the hospital staff.

I found that my language skills created an opportunity, opened for me a psychological door to gaining trust and a good working relationship. A foreigner who sounds at least reasonably Chinese gets people's attention. They will listen to you, you have distinguished yourself from so many others. That's only a first step. You have to have more. But that first step is critical.

In my work as Lindblad's Vice President the Chinese language skills were also extremely helpful. I was able to establish warm individual relationships with counterparts at all levels of the travel service, and those relationships were of great value as we regularly requested new destinations and dealt with growing competition. I want to be objective and fair in what I write here; we were a big client for CITS in those years and any Vice President would have been welcomed warmly to most of the places I visited. But my ability to communicate, to put people at ease and let them open up with me, a foreigner, was certainly of great value in converting that warm welcome into actual agreements and sustained cooperation. We were different from all our competitors, who were either well known US tour operators whose managers would require interpreters everywhere they went, and knew little about China other than its tourism industry, or a new group of good companies owned by American Chinese who competed very much at the lower end of the market. One memorable instance where my personal relationships were of great help came when a CITS counterpart who knew no English spoke to me privately to warn me, subtly, about attempts by a competitor, supported by some CITS officials, to squeeze us out of a very important product.

The most stressful individual experience for me during my 'reign' at Lindblad was a very difficult negotiation when Lindblad was in great financial difficulties and owed CITS a considerable amount of money. This came to a head in peak tourist season 1982 when we had several tour groups entering China every week, and if CITS had refused to receive even one group – as would have been their right – word would have spread quickly and the company would almost certainly have gone bankrupt due to cancellations by customers. I spent two months living in Diaoyutai and negotiating with CITS the entry of every group. The negotiations were conducted entirely in Chinese, which was enormously helpful because it humanized me in their eyes, and even if at times I felt a bit like the subject of a GPCR struggle session it also made me something other than a bad guy. I remember the main CITS representative in these discussions saying to me at one point, “比尔先生，我们中国人不是傻瓜”。It meant a lot that she knew that I knew that this was true. That I was not taking them for 傻瓜. That I was trying to solve

a problem with them in a way that showed full respect for their rules, their credibility and their intelligence.

Interestingly at one critical moment of the negotiations, when our bottom line, or boundary, was being touched, I spoke in English when I made clear that what was being proposed was out of the question. I didn't do that deliberately; it was because I had a visitor from Lindblad there, and we were all speaking in English. Using English helped then. But once that moment passed we went back to Chinese.

That was my first career in China. It was at a very special time, when the number of foreigners who spoke Chinese well was rather small – 一小撮 -- and the number of Chinese who were used to dealing with Westerners was relatively small too. By the time I started my second career in China, as an economist with the UN from 2006-2015, times had changed and both numbers were considerably higher.

Knowing Chinese well was extremely useful during my UN work as well. We've all witnessed many meetings in which reliance on interpreters minimized any real exchange of ideas and more often than not produced comical outcomes, at least for those who could follow both languages and spot the miscommunication.

The classic such situation is the academic workshop, the 研讨会. I defy all other participants in today's conference to name one such event that they've attended in which use of the headset-channeled simultaneous interpretation allowed non-Chinese speakers to follow or be followed clearly throughout by non-English speakers. I suspect I am not the only one here who has occasionally, during a presentation at such a workshop that was for some reason or other not of particular interest to me, listened to the interpretation channel just for entertainment value. It is staggering to remember how many such events I attended and how much time was wasted by non-Chinese speakers. Very well run workshops in which written presentations could be circulated and translated in advance could overcome this problem, but that is not a 研讨会, is it? The ability to participate in such workshops in Chinese, to speak in Chinese and to listen directly to the Chinese presentations and the discussions is of enormous value, challenging as that might be.

But most of all, just as before, speaking Chinese well and understanding Chinese well allowed me to establish trust and respect with my Chinese counterparts, whether government officials, scholars, or NGO representatives. They knew that I understood what they were saying. They knew that I was putting what they were saying in their context, not hearing a translated version and placing it in an entirely different foreign context.

I found this particularly important in my dealings with older Chinese scholars, many with a great deal of knowledge and experience, who were being increasingly sidelined and who seldom had an opportunity to share their thoughts at length and with a foreign listener who could get what they were saying. The research work that I led at both UN agencies where I worked, and my own understanding of issues, were enriched enormously by the contributions of these people.

I'd like to mention a few caveats, however, about the limits on the value of speaking Chinese, especially if one doesn't speak it well enough.

First, speaking in Chinese has its risks. You can offend people inadvertently in a way that is much less likely when speaking a foreign language. Things that are acceptable, even cute, when expressed in a

foreign language, can be jarring and highly provocative when expressed clearly but badly in Chinese, i.e. without awareness of how it will sound to a Chinese person. During my tour escorting days I once was accompanied by two American apprentice tour leaders, one of whom had studied Chinese. He really did not have the right 脾气 for this work. He frequently caused trouble by offending our hosts, and once nearly created a disaster by directly approaching our 全陪 with a forceful request that some arrangement or other be changed. When the 全陪 said that he couldn't do this, he looked at the 全陪 and said “那你是谁?” Even in English that would have been offensive, but in Chinese the effect was multiplied many times. 我是中国国际旅行社的全程陪同 was the response and fortunately, before things escalated further, I intervened and an international incident was averted. I once made a difficult situation worse by saying that I hoped that an official who was unhappy with me would “谅解” instead of “原谅”. To be frank this was not entirely inadvertent, as I did not feel that our transgression had been so serious. But he was an important person whose good will was needed and my poor choice of words, in part due to an incomplete understanding of their very different connotations, was a bad mistake.

I also learned early on that speaking Chinese, even speaking it well, important as it is, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for working effectively in China. Not necessary: I learned this from working on the Yangtse with a colleague who like many of that first group of tour leaders spoke no Chinese at all. Bill Hurst was a Brit who had grown up in Kenya and who had worked for Lindblad for years as one of their finest safari leaders. Bill had a superb working relationship with the Chinese partners we worked with on the boat and on shore. The professionalism with which he approached his contacts with both the Chinese and his tour members, his hard work, his good humor, and the respect and affection he displayed at all times won him great affection and loyalty back. Not knowing the language was not a problem for him – he found ways to communicate.

Not sufficient either; I learned this from another British colleague, who had studied China and Chinese for years but who was a disaster. I am not referring to his relationship with his tour groups, but to his relations with our Chinese counterparts. Suffice it to say that before I entered with my first group he gave me some advice as a veteran tour leader (he'd led one or two groups before me). One piece was: in China everyone calls everyone “小” and “老”. I find it's important to call my CITS guides “Xiao whatever” and to ask them to call me “老。。。”, no matter what our actual ages. To maintain their respect. Fortunately I did not take that bit of advice! On my first tour I had two national guides, one of whom was at least 15 years older than I was – I was 26 years old. Imagine if I had called him “小子”!

As mentioned earlier much of my career has been spent working with countries other than China. This happened by accident but has been something I've enjoyed enormously, especially my long-term involvement in Mongolia, where I lived for eight amazingly rewarding years. I'd like to conclude then by posing the question, why and how did learning Chinese well help me work in Mongolia? One of the nicest compliments I've ever received – made even nicer by the fact that it was said about me to someone else, not directly to me – was when a US Government program evaluation mission came to assess the program I was leading in Mongolia. I saw their report and it included a statement from a very senior Mongolian government official who said that “Bill thinks like a Mongolian.”

Now I don't think that I think like a Mongolian, actually. At least it certainly has never occurred to me that I do. But I do think that the effort I made in learning Chinese, in trying to break out of the tinted

glass box of English language/American thought constructions, the fundamental realization that there was a barrier between me and rich cultures and people around me and that I needed to work constantly to break out of it, helped me everywhere I worked, and in Mongolia most of all. My economics training, my understanding of policy-making in difficult circumstances, all were essential too. But I found a Mongolian version of the gratification that comes in China when you feel that you have showed a Chinese person who might have thought that foreigners simply cannot get it, that sometimes, just sometimes, one can.

In the end, as we all know, learning Chinese well, i.e. well enough that one is thinking in Chinese rather than translating back and forth, is not just difficult; it is impossible. But the effort to get as close as one can to that impossible dream pays off a thousandfold. In addition to all the specific experiences that I've shared above there is the enormous value gained simply from being constantly humbled by one's failings. I've never been prouder of my Chinese than I was during my 一年级 class with Perry and his colleagues. The trajectory after that has been one of frequent moments of satisfaction and pleasure from using the language, coupled with an ever deepening awareness of how far short I was falling of where I wanted to be. That humility is another great benefit of trying to learn Chinese well; it is an essential quality for one who wants to be successful in one's work in China, in other countries, and even in one's home country.