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“How Knowing Chinese Made a Difference in My Career”

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Knowing Chinese made a difference in my career in four key ways: 1) it accelerated my entry into the career Foreign Service, 2) it established my professional credibility in my first overseas assignment to Taipei, Taiwan, 3) it laid the groundwork for learning more difficult foreign languages and securing more challenging, career enhancing assignments, and 4) it helped build bridges in unusual diplomatic circumstances.

Accelerated Entry into the Career Foreign Service

How could I see and understand the world through non-EuroAmerican eyes? That was the burning question for me as I matured through the 1960's era filled with challenges to traditional values and norms and questioning of long-held assumptions and concepts. I decided that I would start by learning how the Chinese saw the world. I believed that learning the Chinese language and Chinese history would be critical to that effort. In addition, looking forward from the 1960's, I believed that knowing Chinese would eventually be quite useful, given that the Chinese were nearly one-quarter of humanity at that time. I began studying Chinese in my senior year at Harvard in 1969. With the systematic and inspiring guidance of the course's lead instructor, Lin Taitai, and our then teaching assistant, Professor Perry Link, I learned the language easily and loved it. Continuing Chinese language and history studies in Stanford University's East Asian Studies MA degree program seemed to me to be the logical next step for delving into Chinese culture and for seeing the world through the eyes of the Chinese people.

At Stanford, I met other students who had studied mandarin using the Wade-Giles Romanization system. I realized that under that system, students would try to pronounce its Romanization as the words would be said in English. Thus they would read or say “*syang*”

as it would seem to be pronounced, for example, “*see-yang*.” With the pin yin Romanization of “*xiang*,” the student only learned the sound assigned to that word and could not pronounce it in any other way. I was very grateful for Professor Link’s and Lin Taitai’s initial training in pin yin.

While interning at the State Department during the summer between my two years at Stanford, I passed the final hurdle for joining the Foreign Service, the oral exam. Throughout my second year at Stanford, State Department representatives phoned me at least once per week to urge me to accept their offer to join the Foreign Service. They pointed out that relations with China were expanding in the wake of the Shanghai Communique, and the Department really needed Foreign Service officers who knew Chinese. They further explained quite frankly that with my undergraduate economics degree, my MA in East Asian Studies, my Chinese language skills, and my African-American heritage, I would be in high demand for challenging assignments leading to rapid career advancement. In that context, I got to know the State Department’s Stanford University diplomat-in-residence, a China specialist. He told me that he liked my work in the classes he audited. Knowing that I had accepted the offer to join the Foreign Service and would begin my career immediately after receiving the Stanford MA in June 1972, he invited me to join him in State Department’s East Asian Regional Affairs Office after completing my A-100 (Foreign Service Officer Basic Training) course. He was already slated to become that office’s deputy director on his return to Washington. He noted that most new Foreign Service Officers normally would have their first assignments overseas as consular officers, but if I would agree to join him, he would arrange for me to begin my career in his office. I agreed. Four months after President Nixon’s trip to China, I was sworn in and later began working in the Office of East Asian Regional Affairs in September 1972.

During my first year in the East Asian Regional Affairs Office, I took the State Department’s Chinese language exam and scored “minimum professional proficiency.” I thought that my score should have been higher, but colleagues advised me not to be concerned about the test results. They explained that the politics of the examining system at that time would rarely permit a new Foreign Service who was not trained by the State Department to score above minimum professional proficiency. A few weeks later, and still within the first year of my career, the State

Department approved my request for advanced Chinese language training at its Advanced Language School in Taichung, Taiwan, beginning in August, 1973. Normally, this opportunity would have been granted a few years later in the career. I was thrilled with that assignment, because it would have accelerated my reaching interpreter level Chinese. Having worked briefly with Ambassador Chase Freeman, the senior American interpreter at President Nixon's meetings with Chairman Mao, I was truly excited to begin the advanced language training so early in my career. In these ways, knowing Chinese made the significant difference in accelerating both my entry into the Foreign Service and the pace of my career trajectory. For students considering foreign affairs careers, the State Department's need for Foreign Service Officers who know Chinese will grow as we manage ever increasing opportunities and challenges in our relations with China. For those students, knowing Chinese will remain a career accelerator.

Established Professional Credibility at Post

Life has a way of intervening in even the best made plans. After shipping my belongings to the Language School in Taichung in the summer of 1973, I became very ill and had to remain in Washington for one year. During that year, I was offered an assignment as market research officer at the new US Trade Center in Taipei, Taiwan, beginning a few months after its opening in the spring of 1974. My wife and I left for Taiwan in August, 1974, one month after our marriage. The State Department agreed that after finishing my two-year assignment in Taipei, I would then go to the Taichung Language School for interpreter level training. I expected that my Chinese would be even stronger at that point and would allow me to advance rapidly at the School.

My work in Taipei required extensive interaction with the Chinese business community, the members of which spoke little English at that time. I determined that I needed to develop Chinese business language skills, and arranged for daily lessons in my office with a teacher from the Taipei Language Institute. In addition, I asked my Chinese office colleagues' permission to join them for lunch every day so that we could speak Chinese together. During our first days of conversations, they would laugh when I spoke. Fearing that I was making those classic worst mistakes that trip everyone now and then in a foreign language, I eventually asked them what I

was saying incorrectly. They explained that my mistakes were minor, and they helped me correct them. They added that what really made them laugh was seeing and hearing for the first time a black American speaking high Mandarin better than they. I did not know I was speaking high Mandarin. I only knew that I was trying to speak as well as I could the language I was taught in college and graduate school. Over time though, I could hear differences in the way my colleagues and I spoke. In their speech, there was a clear absence of the “er” and “ar” endings on Chinese expressions for there, here, and child, for example. “Shi” in pin yin would be pronounced as “sz” in pin yin. “Shenmo-shihou” in pin yin would be pronounced as “szemma-szhou.” I got used to those and other differences while establishing credibility with my colleagues. After months of lunch conversations together, they said to me one day, “Nǐ shì wǒmende lǎo xiāng.” If I understood well, that was meant as a compliment.

As my wife and I moved around Taipei, we spoke Chinese and sparked considerable curiosity and goodwill. When we first visited our favorite Szechuan restaurant near the US Trade Center, in Taipei, curious staff members surrounded and welcomed us. When news of a black couple speaking Chinese in the restaurant reached the kitchen, chefs took turns coming out to greet us warmly, some in uniforms with cleavers in hand. They by no means intended to harm us; they simply left their work stations just that quickly to witness the event. Some sat at our table for a while to learn from where we came, how long we would stay in Taipei, and how we liked being in Taiwan. Others wanted to be sure we understood the menu. We returned to that restaurant often, and I hosted many official functions there. The staff always went out of their way to prepare something special that we had not ordered. This reception certainly impressed our guests. More importantly, the food was consistently fabulous. My family members and I still prepare at home a number of the dishes my wife and I savored there.

My work granted me the best opportunity to see the world through Chinese eyes. As market research officer at the US Trade Center, my job was to determine the potential size of the culture market in Taiwan for US exports in which we enjoyed a global competitive advantage. Computers, office equipment, laboratory instruments, health care and medical technologies, earth moving machinery, construction equipment, and commercial kitchen equipment were leading examples of such exports. To gain insights for the studies, I met with officials from the

Ministries of Trade, Industry, Foreign Affairs, Finance, and Health. I visited industrial enterprises, ports, banks, and university departments. My objective was to understand the potential users' forward plans, the capacities they hoped to develop, how they wished to apply them, and ends they wished to achieve. I also sought insights on all the potential suppliers they were considering. In that process, I learned an invaluable lesson that served me well for the remainder of my career. While speaking Chinese is invaluable, it is at times more important to be willing and able to listen patiently and accurately in Chinese, and in other foreign languages. Since my capacity to listen and understand exceeded my ability speak, I decided to listen to best effect. Many potential Chinese users of American equipment exports told me, for example, that American suppliers would not be able to compete well in Taiwan with Japanese suppliers for two key reasons:

1) business strategies differ: The American business strategy is, they observed, to make as many equipment sales as possible and leave. By contrast, Japanese suppliers make as many equipment sales as possible but also conclude maintenance and parts replacement agreements under long term contracts. Combined with Japan's proximity to Taiwan, the security of knowing that parts and maintenance are more easily available often encourages Taiwan purchasers to choose Japanese over US suppliers.

2) cross-cultural relations differ: They said the Americans are on a mission. In meetings, they wish to get to the point, discuss the advantages of their equipment and make the sale. They have little patience for tea, polite talk, discussing the family, and listening to lengthy points on thousands of years of Chinese culture and traditions. This impatience is perceived often as rudeness that could sour relationships important for business. By contrast, Japanese business representative understand and operate well in the Chinese cultural context of preferring to build longer lasting relationships.

I included those insights in the market research studies I conducted and in briefings for Americans on the business climate in Taiwan. My hope was that they would adjust their interactions to best advantage. Some did, and some did not. My two years in that job brought exciting opportunities to assist American representatives participating in multiple trade shows to

demonstrate their equipment to potential Chinese buyers and to seek potential Chinese partners for the longer term. The market research insights drawn from interactions with the Chinese business community and conveyed to American businesses established further my credibility at post. Knowing Chinese and seeing the world through Chinese eyes made a difference in the usefulness of this work for US-Taiwan commercial relations.

Laid the Groundwork for More Challenging Languages and Assignments

Sometimes, life's intervening is an advantage. As my tour in Taiwan approached its end in 1976, the State Department's European Affairs Bureau offered me a two-year tour as commercial officer in Budapest, Hungary via ten months of Hungarian language training in Washington. While I do not know the specific reasons why the Bureau chose me, I do believe that knowing Chinese played a role in the Department's wishing to place me in an even more difficult foreign language training program. My wife and I weighed the Hungary opportunity against our original plan to move to Taichung for interpreter level Chinese language training. We decided that an assignment in Budapest would place us in the center of Europe and allow us to drive to any European country we wished to see. Our thought was that European assignments are hard to get. We should take Budapest, because we will never be posted to Europe again. Having set early roots in the East Asian Affairs Bureau, I could always return later to Chinese affairs and get the advanced level language training. For ten months, my wife and I studied Hungarian together at the State Department's Foreign Service Institute. That language was far more difficult than Chinese, but a few similarities between them in sentence structures helped me to learn it easily with determined effort. I scored far higher on the Hungarian proficiency exam than I did on the Chinese exam, but I always felt that my Chinese was stronger. On the completion of our language course, we left for Budapest in July of 1977.

Because Hungary was a part of the Soviet Bloc in 1977 and relations between the USSR and China were strained, there were no Chinese people and no signs of Chinese culture in Hungary at that time. There was not even a Chinese restaurant. Having taken Chinese cooking lessons in Taipei, my wife decided we could reduce my representational expenses if she prepared Chinese food for official lunches at our residence and avoided the artificially elevated costs of official

lunches at restaurants. The first such lunch included representatives from the Hungarian Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Industry, and Foreign Trade. We had very extensive and productive discussions over a wonderful Szechuan style multi-course luncheon. Noting that they missed such meals from their earlier assignments in western capitals, the guests said they were thrilled to have that lunch at our home in Budapest. They were amazed that my wife prepared and served the entire lunch all by herself, complete with her usual rapid fire sharp humor from which no one was spared. At what I thought was the end of lunch, I thanked everyone for coming and going productively through a long business agenda. I said I knew they had to get back to their offices and so did I, but we will have another lunch in near future. The senior most official from the Foreign Ministry said to me that if I needed to return to the office, I should go. He and his colleagues would stay and keep my wife's company. In fact, they did. While lunch did not involve the use of the Chinese language, it did involve my wife's using elements of Chinese culture in a unique environment that broke the ice and made working with the Hungarians far easier than it might have been.

My wife often prepared Chinese lunches and dinners for our guests from western embassies. She prepared them also for the US Marines who guarded Embassy Budapest and whose interactions were seriously restricted to the western embassies for reasons of security. In addition, she taught many of the western diplomatic spouses to prepare Chinese dishes. As news of those meals got around Budapest, foreign diplomats asked us to invite them to our home. Our own US Ambassador, Philip M. Kaiser, a political appointee and leading figure in the Democratic Party, made it known that he and his wife wished to be invited to our home for a Chinese meal. Given my junior officer status, my wife and I were at first reluctant to do so, but we finally did invite them. They had a wonderful time. From that point until their deaths within the last ten years, they took a deep interest in my wife and me, and they treated us as two more of their children. In Washington, they invited us for years to numerous cultural events. We enjoyed fascinating dinner and lunch discussions together with Washington power players whom they wanted us to meet. The Ambassador never failed to call now and then just to see how we were doing and offer very helpful advice on steps to take next.

Helped Build Bridges

In one very unusual twist, I did have occasions to speak Chinese during our 1977-79 Budapest assignment. Shortly after we settled there in 1977, a very elegant Mexican diplomat and his wife arrived from an extended tour in Beijing. They spoke no Hungarian and no English, which made it difficult for them to function initially in Budapest. Fortunately, the diplomat spoke Chinese very well, though with a hint of a Spanish accent. His wife spoke Chinese less well. As a result, at official and social functions, I would speak Chinese with the Mexican diplomat and his wife and help interpret for them. Westerners, Hungarians, and others were fascinated to observe two Mexicans and a black American communicating with one another in Chinese in Budapest, Hungary. Doing so helped bridge the communications gap and make the Mexican couple feel more comfortable and included as they learned to communicate in Hungarian. It also facilitated warm friendship between the Mexican and the American Embassy staff.

In yet another unusual twist, I used Chinese in Budapest. At a social event on Friday, evening, December 15, 1978, my counterpart at the Chinese Embassy in Budapest informed me that the US and the People's Republic of China had established diplomatic relations. I had seen no word on that from Washington earlier that day, and I was unsure whether his information was accurate. I informed our Deputy Chief of Mission who called Washington and received confirmation. The official message from Washington was in the following Monday morning's cable traffic. Clearly, knowing Chinese helped significantly in learning of this very important development. It would have been quite embarrassing if other diplomats had raised this point with our Embassy's leadership on Saturday, December 16, 1978, and they were not aware.

Returning from Budapest in 1979, I worked in Washington until the summer of 1984, when I was assigned to Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs for graduate economics studies. In the spring of 1985, the State Department's East Asian Affairs Bureau informed me that they would like me to open a new US consulate in Shenyang and bring me back into Chinese Affairs. I expressed my deep gratitude for the offer, but declined. I explained that I had already accepted the European Bureau's offer of a four year

assignment to the US Mission to the European Communities (now the EU) in Brussels, my wife had accepted a job offer at the US Mission to NATO in Brussels, and our three year old son was already registered in a school in Brussels. Following the Brussels tour when major transformations toward European integration were underway, I was offered a four year tour as Counselor for Economic Affairs at Embassy Paris when the French led efforts for deeper EU integration, a return to Budapest as Deputy Chief of Mission as the US helped Hungary complete its transformation to democracy and market economy and prepare for NATO accession, and a final overseas assignment as US Ambassador to Iceland.

In Iceland, knowing Chinese helped to build bridges. The Chinese Ambassador and his wife spoke little English and no Icelandic. At official and social functions, I would be sure to speak with them. Otherwise, they would stand by themselves for most of the event. I was often seated next to one of them at lunches and dinners to assist with communications. In my final Foreign Service assignment as Deputy to the Commandant of the National War College in Washington, US Air Force Major General Teresa Marne Peterson, I assisted with translations during the visit of her counterpart, the Commandant of the People's Republic of China's War College, and his accompanying students.

Conclusion

When I began my career I planned to work on China, China, and more China, and to see and understand the world through non-EuroAmerican eyes. Not having studied European affairs, I had no idea then that thirty-three of my thirty-five years in the Foreign Service would be spent seeing the world through European eyes, interpreting for Washington how European policies affect US interests, and advising how best to cooperate with the Europeans to address global challenges while protecting American interests. Through it all, I do believe that knowing Chinese accelerated my entry into the Foreign Service, and laid the groundwork for my advancement to increasingly more challenging assignments. Most importantly, I believe that the active, focused listening skills that I learned by necessity in Taiwan through knowing and using the Chinese language provided me early the transferable listening discipline that I applied throughout my

career, no matter what the foreign language or the country. Furthermore, in ways I could never have predicted, Chinese helped me to build bridges between people that facilitated US diplomatic relationships. Those are the differences that knowing Chinese made in my truly enjoyable career.