

Chinese Language Learning and Me: Two Roads Diverged in a Yellow Wood

By Greg Gilligan

Many times I question the strength of my proficiency in Mandarin Chinese, perhaps because it has been and remains such an important part of my personal and professional life. In most respects, I've been very fortunate in learning Mandarin how and when I did.

My start with Mandarin Chinese studies have a direct correlation with getting kicked out of my beginning French class in college. My French teacher was also my academic advisor, so when I responded the first day of class that I was studying French because the university didn't have a Chinese program, he kicked me out of his class and set me straight. As a result I sold my father on the wisdom of paying *another* five thousand bucks toward my education (this was 1988 - in today's dollars that is about \$10,200) for nine weeks of Mandarin Chinese courses at the Middlebury College Summer Language Schools.

Off I went to Middlebury passionate about the chance to learn Chinese and scared as hell I wouldn't be able to do so; I had a decidedly unsuccessful experience with high school Spanish, mostly because I didn't apply myself. That wasn't going to be a problem at Middlebury as I had matured considerably and brought with me a whole different level of dedication. In fact, of the type of kids that end up at Middlebury in the summer, I was one of the only ones chided by my Chinese teachers for studying too hard. Secretly that was a badge of pride for me, but it wasn't my motivation (the secret pride came in that these fine Chinese academics were each of the "eat bitter" generation who had overcome tremendous odds in the mainland China academic system to achieve scholarly success). I truly was scared that if I didn't study my arse off I wouldn't be able to learn the language well. No exaggeration, I was tremendously fearful I just might not, literally, make the grade. I remember even at one point my teachers prodding me like a lab animal as they showed each other the hives I'd developed from the stress of too much study, not enough sleep and lack of sunshine - Middlebury is an exceptionally nice place to enjoy the outdoors but that wasn't happening for me unless I was under a tree with a book in my hands. I skipped meals to get in a bit more study time, that's how scared I was by Mandarin Chinese's fearsome reputation for being hard to learn.

Originally I went to Middlebury with no longer-term goals then engaging a longstanding cultural interest in things China, and achieving some academic credit toward my undergraduate degree. As a kid I loved to read and had an interest in history. As a boy of ten or twelve years old I was drawn by World War II history, and maybe like a lot of little boys I liked the tanks and planes and guns and stories of heroism. What really changed for me though was reading about the U.S. and China armies having to figure out how to work together to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers. Colorful characters like General Joseph Stilwell and Clare Chennault of Flying Tigers fame brought out for me an interest in learning more about this distant and very

different place. Middlebury definitely met my needs in scratching this cultural itch, but it also helped me form a practical way forward.

That first summer of Chinese learning, and some modest success born of great teachers and a lot of hard work, caused me to plan beyond this purely cultural interest in learning Chinese. I tweaked my original plans for graduate school to now include not just Law but also Asian Studies, with design on China-related work after graduation. This then is the focus of this essay, and how that first important summer set me on a path of language learning, personal growth and career opportunity. That first summer's learning was twenty-eight years ago, and in another eleven weeks I will reach the twenty-year mark of continuous living and working in mainland China. And, while I'd like to claim great foresight in the explosive growth China has accomplished in those twenty-eight years, my stubborn inclination to take the road less traveled - as suggested in the poem-referenced sub-title of this essay - helped put me on a path of tremendous personal and professional reward. Now in that period of time of course China studies and Chinese language learning subsequently became a road more heavily traveled, which on reflection made my journey even more amazing.

The Chinese invoke fate more naturally than do people from a western culture, or at least those from U.S. culture. In the early part of my journey with China Studies I somewhat jokingly referred to fate's role in my choices, but more and more I am convinced of its influence. Over the years I've collected many examples of my fated relationship with the Chinese language, and even this essay brought one such example – in the fellow conference member who asked me to read his draft essay - Professor James Hargett's essay very quickly mentioned General Chennault in his path to China Studies. I laughed as I read it because of the twist of fate. It is of course a nice coincidence in parallel with my experience, but with the many more fated experiences I've had I seldom look past these moments. I'll give then just one additional but momentous example, also with a link to the conference this essay supports.

My formal language study occurred almost entirely during the summer recesses of academic years while in college and graduate school. In 1988 the Middlebury College Chinese Summer Language School had Princeton's Professor C.P. Chou as its director. This was before Princeton established their own summer program in Beijing (also led since its founding in 1993 by Prof. Chou). I began at Middlebury my language studies, and one of the most important and formative relationships of my life, so this second example of fate has particularly deep meaning.

C.P. Chou and I were professor and student, then boss and assistant, and throughout mentor and mentee. We share a bond and a friendship, directly formed around the immensity of the challenge of Chinese language learning - well, teaching from his perspective and learning from mine. So imagine, having formed a close bond over six consecutive summers, and following C.P. to Beijing to partake in Princeton in Beijing's inaugural year, about the role of fate when Prof. Chou and I lost touch over the subsequent many years.

One summer day about ten or so years into my time living in mainland China, and because of work in high profile corporate positions coupled with language ability, I was off to one of the reasonably frequent speaking engagements that come my way. I remember the day well because it turned out to be so remarkable. I was surprised when I showed up to the speech to a big room and an audience of about two thousand people. And I was pleased - biorhythms favored me that day and I nailed the speech - and the crowd rewarded the white guy speaking decent Chinese. As we all know, some days your language skills are fully switched on and other days not so much, so I was happy to have quite a good day with a large audience. The day got much better however, when ducking the expected post-conference lunch, I found myself on a pleasant summer afternoon in the vicinity of the Beijing Normal / Princeton in Beijing campus. Fate whispered and I thought to seek out the mentor I hadn't seen in *thirteen years*.

There is plenty of fun detail in this story, but I'll get right to it – long story short, I showed up to find my old mentor on a day when he'd been trying to find me to speak to PIB students. This was 2007 and I hadn't seen C.P. since August of 1993, his assistant failed in finding me, and on the very day he wanted to bring me to speak to the newest crop of PIB students, I turned up on his doorstep after no contact for thirteen years! Fate. Chinese language learning. Me. I don't know how else to describe it. So those are just two examples of the fate that brought me on this path, though there are many more.

In considering drafting this essay I wondered about the right split in emphasis of Mandarin Chinese language learning on my personal life and my professional life, but that consideration for me fell to the wayside. Probably not coincidentally, on a different vein, I had an exchange several months ago with another Chinese professor friend, from Washington University and Duke in China's summer program director, Prof. Liang Xia. I mention these two veins together because Liang Laoshi put to me some questions about my learning experience that came together in a manner with the upcoming Princeton conference's focus, such that as I considered these various things a theme emerged in mind to describe my experience with Chinese language learning of **totality** and **commitment**.

The "totality" of my experience with learning Chinese and my years in China means that I can't possibly separate its impact into discrete areas segmenting the personal and the professional. Nor could I, when considering questions of approach to Chinese language learning, imagine any success without totality in commitment. While my relocation from the U.S. to mainland China was professionally focused, I was committed to being here indefinitely and so my personal life inextricably flourished alongside my career. And, as the business environment of China requires whole-hearted commitment to allow a chance for success, that commitment causes a blurring of personal and professional relationships. One need spend a lot of time drinking tea, banqueting, and forming deeper interpersonal bonds so that one can scratch through the surface to the inner complexity of China. Around my Chinese language learning experience I've made deep, lasting friendships across nearly three decades, and couldn't imagine being able to do so without a solid ability in Chinese.

I also managed to mix the personal and professional by falling madly in love with a colleague. My beautiful wife Annie and I worked together before she left the company and we married soon after. We have two beautiful bilingual kids, and they are a wonderful mix of two cultures. Our family life is to me a daily affirmation of the bounty we enjoy owing in direct measure to the fate I experienced that first summer in Middlebury, the totality of commitment put into those and subsequent years of learning, and the wonderful benefits derived thereof.

Now comes the risk of sounding didactic, and I admit a slight diversion, but I can't help myself. All this reflection brings to the fore just how important learning Chinese has been in my life, and it intersects with the yearly opportunities I have to offer sharing with the crops of young language learners who come through Beijing each year. Whether speaking to the PIB or Duke program students as I've done now for many consecutive summers, I've felt compelled to change my approach. I used to show up with some planned presentations on various topics and just hope to find some topics that would incite the students into discussion or reflection on the act of learning Chinese, but I didn't push very hard a message about my or their efforts. A catalyst came however when Liang Laoshi asked me this year for my opinion on the academic debate around the necessity of teaching students of Chinese the written language. That question, and what drives that particular debate, caused me to think back to the theme of "totality and commitment".

Admitting first that there may be a subset of Chinese students for whom a beginning level of Chinese is sufficient to meet their purposes, the broader group of students need to reach intermediate and advanced levels of Chinese to have any meaningful chance of their language skills making a difference in their personal and/or professional futures. So, assuming one accepts that premise, the question then of teaching Chinese without the written language flew counter to the totality and commitment I've found necessary along the way. I actually became uncomfortable with the proposition because it strikes me as intellectually dishonest. There, I said it.

Unless one is in that small subset for whom beginning Chinese will suffice, other Chinese language students enter the endeavor with the hope that they will become meaningfully communicative in the language. Not everyone needs to be perfectly fluent but there lies the catch – the language is so bloody hard to begin with that just getting to an intermediate level is tremendously difficult. To obscure that reality and offer an approach for mass-market appeal is not in the interest of quality Chinese language learning, it is simply an effort toward growing the market – making bad Chinese more available to more people. That may have some value, but let's at least be upfront about it and admit the value is limited.

Naturally this essay is written on my computer's keyboard. I seldom take pen to paper any more outside of taking meeting notes, and then almost always in English. If I need to write in Chinese, ninety-nine percent of the time it is done on a mobile device or my laptop. I seldom write Chinese with pen and paper, and as a result my writing skills are rustier than they were before the advent of email and the pervasive use of things digital in our daily lives.

Fundamentally important to me however is that the reading and writing foundation is already there. I read Chinese at a high level (mostly in simplified characters but my traditional character recognition isn't too bad) and I could recover the predominance of my vocabulary in written form with a few solid weeks of practice. I cannot fathom how I'd be able to read let alone write if I'd taken the Chinese Lite approach the debate entails. And without those skills, unless you have Mark Zuckerberg-like budgets available, you won't have a Chinese teacher at your beck and call in the years beyond formal classroom training. My conclusion then is that Chinese language learning is exceptionally difficult, requires in learning inclusion of the written language so one can continue to study on one's own in daily life, and without recognition of that fact and totality of commitment, getting beyond an intermediate level is out of reach for most. Attrition rates for Chinese learners are almost B.U.D.S. school-like.

When formal classroom training is no longer available to the hopeful learner of Chinese – if it ever was – then the ability to continue to grow one's skills depends on the foundation of reading and sometimes writing. Listening carefully to spoken Chinese isn't enough to continue the learning progression. Rapidity of speech, colloquialisms, regional accents, poor diction, all come together to make simply "picking up" more Chinese impractical for someone who needs to continue to strengthen their skills. We students need the tools to continue to learn on our own a language that requires sustained effort over a long period of time.

Being a non-Chinese speaker of Chinese offers me lessons in humility on a daily basis, so I hope the above rant on learning and teaching approaches is understood as part of the larger fabric I embrace; I took the topic's diversion not to claim superiority in skills or mindset, but conversely to illuminate the enriching struggle I encountered in reaching my current level of proficiency. Living in China and applying commitment to my family life, friendships and work, and the totality of reward that's come my way, are inextricably a part of those same themes in learning the language.

A lot of expatriates in China struggle with an alienation of sorts because even with many years in country the place can still seem indecipherable or inhospitable. In some ways, mostly political not social, the inhospitable aspect is true, but the cipher question is a matter of combined mindset and ability. Possessing a mindset of openness still then requires the right data for input. Anything less than first-hand data is too easily corrupted, so the only way to successfully navigate a place where interpersonal relationships, the business environment and the political environment are each so challenging and complex, is to be able to go deep and direct, unfiltered by others, with one's own Chinese language skills. Acquiring those skills, by at least first embracing the difficulty in doing so, is really the only way to rise to the challenge.

As mentioned above I speak to language-student groups with a renewed focus. Rather than hinting at motivation through indirect example as I did in the past, I feel obligated to a bit of a "scared-straight" approach. The Chinese language classroom isn't Rahway State Prison, but to avoid becoming another victim of drop-out attrition, a little reality and tough-love seems necessary.

So with that didactic diversion out of my system, I'll give some concrete examples of Chinese language skills' application in my professional life. I mentioned above the speech given to a few thousand people delivered in Chinese and it going well. That however was well into my China-based career so I'll back up then to a few other reaffirming moments. Immediately following my first summer of Chinese language learning I bumped into a Chinese teacher and we started to chat. She asked me, in painfully slow and articulate pronunciation "你的。。。中文。。。学了。。。多长时间？ (How long have you studied Chinese?)". I responded fairly easily "我中文学了已经有九个星期 (I've studied now already for nine weeks)". We then went back-and-forth with her trying to correct me to say nine months, or nine-something, because she couldn't comprehend that after nine weeks of study we were conversing. That was fun and again, reaffirming and encouraging.

A next notable experience was returning to Middlebury for a second summer after not studying Chinese for the entire preceding academic year. Though I only had the foundation of the nine weeks from the previous summer, I was able to hold my own with the predominance of students that had just two weeks prior completed ten full months of study. And some of those students had not just the ten months of study to be able to achieve placement into second-year classes at Middlebury. More and more I felt able to "make the grade", and had increased confidence I'd be able to learn Chinese well.

Fun examples of the utility of my new-found abilities in Chinese continued into grad school, getting to know classmates from the P.R.C. who weren't accustomed to Americans speaking their mother tongue, or even the occasional passerby in St. Louis remarking something about us "foreigners" and me snidely reminding them that in Missouri I wasn't a foreigner – they were!

I moved then after graduation to mainland China, Fujian Province's Fuzhou City. Fuzhou in January of 1997 was hardly Shangri-la. Back then even Shanghai and Beijing were a far site from offering the creature comforts one finds there today. "Economic Opening and Reform" really didn't start to pick up steam in China until 1995 so Beijing and Shanghai saw some pretty significant change by about 1998 or so, but the lesser cities didn't really begin to accelerate change toward today's form until 2005 or beyond. Fuzhou had little in the way of international commerce, expatriate-type housing or schools, and very little in the way of access to imported goods that most non-Chinese would seek in a long-term posting (and remember these days were pre-e-commerce). A result of this stage of development was then very few other foreigners in Fuzhou. There were a few more at the other end of the province in Xiamen but still only a very few.

I went to China with McDonald's, and landed in Fujian to lead McDonald's operations there. I remember my great surprise when one day three weeks into my posting a customer eating next to me in one of our restaurants said "I know you, three weeks ago you were at such and such a place buying a rug.". Great surprise. I learned early on that I had to watch my step in Fujian because there were so few foreigners, and almost none that spoke Chinese. People

remembered me fairly easily as I surprised them by knowing the language in a place where few expats existed. If I got out of line people would know.

Over the years this scenario or ones like it would repeat over and over, amplified even by the iconic force of the Golden Arches as a hallmark for an improving investment environment. In my nine years posting in Southeast China (my work geography expanded over time), I was a frequent guest of the state media as the newspapers and television stations wanted to get the message out that where McDonald's invests so too should other foreign enterprise. I was a minor celebrity with that much media exposure and it was all of course enabled by my language ability – the cameras loved having a Chinese-speaking laowai help entertain viewers (I did though leave those silly variety show appearances to others who were perhaps unaware of the exploitation of their images in very unflattering ways) .

Very important to my time at McDonald's, including when I transitioned from Southeast China to a China-wide job based in Beijing, was the ability to make an impact with government. I mention above the media interaction my language abilities allowed. More important was my ability to communicate with, and establish credibility and trust among, government officials beyond just the media. Running restaurants is a local endeavor, but running a big brand brought me in contact with officials at all levels, from local officials to today's president of China (he was a provincial party secretary when I had the pleasure of a private audience with him to report on McDonald's investment activity in his province). Later, when posted to Beijing, much of my work involved broadening McDonald's corporate affairs efforts to gain support of the central government. The maturation of the brand in China made that an important next step for the company, and my position as a senior executive that could communicate directly with senior government officials gave me access and results that would have been very difficult to achieve without the right language skills.

Following my McDonald's days I ran for a few years the Beijing operations of a U.S. consulting company, before my present (and wonderful!) job leading the PGA TOUR's efforts in Greater China. While a consultant, our primary client base was foreign multinationals. Having direct experience as a business person, and having gained experience in the municipalities and provinces in addition to the capital city – each enabled by my competency in Chinese – gave me credibility among our clients, most of whom sought how to tell their stories effectively and demonstrate to Chinese consumers and government officials that their products and services were worth support. I'd done that as someone who ran P&Ls for years in China, so my clients were more (certainly not always!) likely then to be open to the experience I shared.

The last practical example I'll provide is also Beijing based. Upon moving to Beijing I quickly got involved with the American Chamber of Commerce in China (AmCham China), and the following year earned the votes to serve on the board of governors. After a few years as a Governor I eventually was elected for two years as Vice-Chairman and then another two years as Chairman. This experience was very different from my time in the provinces in that all of a sudden my time was split between English-speaking and Chinese speaking environments. While

in Southeast China I spent nine years speaking Chinese ninety-eight percent of the time, barring the few weeks I'd get visits from headquarters or travel home to see family in the states. It was to the point, no kidding, where my English was stilted upon going home until a week or two into a visit when my tongue and brain could shake the Chinese grammar I imposed on my native English. My friends made fun of me and heavens knows what my colleagues thought of my English then. The point though is that the same language ability that allowed me to gain good work experience across China then also positioned me well to serve the American business community in leading AmCham. I'm fairly certain that background, and the ability to represent AmCham externally with the all-important world of Chinese officialdom without the burden of interpreters, was a factor in getting elected to those positions. These examples above, compelling or otherwise, reflect pretty accurately the importance command of Chinese has had in my life and career in China. In my PGA TOUR offices I proudly display a picture of my (already-dated) meeting with now President Xi and of course when asked when it was taken I respond "yesterday".

Reflecting on preparation for this conference and the experiences I share here reaffirms both the importance Chinese language learning has had on my life and on the growth achieved because of just how hard Chinese language skills were to acquire. The two are a perfect example of effort and reward, where something incredibly valuable became available only through lots of hard work and great difficulty. What the language offers then is so much more than language, but love, friendship, personal and professional growth in having to be competent bilingually, and so on. With the Chinese language I've been given the chance to be humbled on so many more levels than just language, but then rewarded by learning life and work lessons in processing things in the primary language. Think of all the many things about China that just don't allow full understanding in translation that offer epiphanies in the primary language. The go-to example I use on language class students is "renao" (热闹). Properly translated it means exciting, or sometimes busy and exciting. What's lost however is the cultural element, because literally translated it means "hot and noisy". In China hot and noisy is mostly perceived positively, and thus exciting and good. In a western sense hot and noisy is most decidedly bad and unwanted. Tranquility and cool would seem the western ideal, not a cacophony of light, sound, color and throngs of people. Fascinating stuff, and admittedly as a student of Chinese I used the word renao for years before I ever had that epiphany of cultural learning the word entails. This example is of course interesting but simplistic; when one begins to think of the complexity of political life and jargon in the People's Republic, similar examples abound and offer remarkable insight not readily available to non-speakers or Chinese speakers with a lower level of skill. It is true too in the very dynamic tech-sector here and the life of Chinese "netizens" skirting the "Great Firewall". While one can grasp the foundations of these areas in translation, how ready really is a U.S. surfer of the internet to grasp the meaning of a "human flesh search" often simply abbreviated as "人肉" with all its deeper social implications. Fascinating stuff (ok maybe just to me?), and I could but shouldn't go on.

I'll conclude these thoughts then with a renewed purpose of improving my Chinese language skills, with full recognition of all those skills allowed me beyond simply language, and a deep and often begrudging recognition of how hard those skills are to acquire and even keep sharp. Life, work and of course sloth has sometimes gets in the way of continued improvement, but the reward so far, and further rewards that await, make it all worthwhile. Here is to hoping my fellow conference participants – and outside readers if this merits a read – reap similar reward in the pursuit of Chinese language learning or teaching.

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