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Essay by Tom Gorman for “The Impact of Chinese Studies on My Career” book

“You’re never coming back ...” and Other Tales from My Journey to China

As a 15-year old growing up in the suburbs of Chicago , I couldn’t possibly have imagined that embarking on the study of the Chinese language would determine the trajectory of my career and the rest of my life . In the mid-60s , studying Chinese in an American high school was very unusual , but I had no idea it would be a life-changing opportunity .

Those were frosty times in US-China relations . Since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1979 , the US and China have faced fairly constant friction and challenges in their relationship . By contrast , during the mid-60s , they had no relationship to speak of .

It was shortly after the McCarthy era and the end of the Korean War ; the Cold War was in full tilt ; and China’s violent and traumatic Cultural Revolution was ramping up .

China was widely referred to as “Red China” in the US . No wonder one of my parents’ friends asked me “What are you going to do with Chinese when you grow up ? Open a laundry ?”

My first-year grades at Loyola Academy , a Jesuit secondary school in my home town of Wilmette , landed me among the top ten students in my class . As a result , I was invited to join an honors track in the second year , which included courses in ancient Greek and modern Chinese .

I received a letter from the school enclosing an IBM 360 print out -- an ancient relic of early computing - a khaki-colored card with tiny rectangular holes punched through it .

The study of Latin and Greek in high school was not uncommon then . The study of Chinese , on the other hand , was almost unheard of . It was considered weird , and irrelevant to most career paths .

Ironically , as I was later to learn , around 200 secondary schools in the US were offering Chinese language courses in the mid-1960s . The vast majority (not including Loyola's) were made possible by funding from the U.S. National Defense Education Act . Federal funding support was made available to any school which would begin teaching Chinese , Arabic , Russian , or Japanese (the four language groups deemed America's most likely adversaries in future conflicts) .

Funding grants were mainly disbursed through the Carnegie Corporation , but by the end of the 1960s , funding for the secondary school programs was drying up . Many of the Chinese courses were wound up , as I would learn some years later researching my senior thesis .*

Apart from the challenges of funding , that first wave of high school Chinese programs faced other obstacles , such as finding qualified teachers and suitable curricular materials , not to mention the fundamental problem : not many Americans saw the benefit of studying Chinese .

After I received Loyola's suggested course offerings for year two , there was some discussion at home as to whether studying Chinese was a wise choice . My parents suggested I talk with the college counsellor , who enthusiastically endorsed the idea .

*"Chinese Language Programs in American Secondary Schools 1960-9" .

His logic was that I would be in a very elite group of college applicants who would have 3 years of Chinese studies . He was right , of course . This would become the first instance when having a Chinese studies background served me well in a competitive selection process .

The more I thought about it , the more it seemed like studying Chinese would be somewhat like preparing for outer space travel , getting ready for contact with this enormous mass of humanity who were further removed from my daily life than any other major group on the planet . China was a huge country , yet still isolated and shrouded in self-imposed mystery . We were not yet engaged in a conversation , but it seemed like this must change one day .

From my vantage point as a kid growing up in the Midwest , China was rich in exotic appeal . My wanderlust was stoked by reading National Geographic Magazine , with stunning photos of rice paddies , pagodas , and bamboo forests .

I accepted the recommended courses and began studying Chinese and Greek .

At the outset , there were 40 of us in Chinese class . Our teacher , Mr Guo , was a recent arrival from Taiwan , unfamiliar with the shenanigans of American high school kids . Unfortunately for him , we exploited this mercilessly , if mirthfully .

On our first day of class , Teacher Guo turned on a reel-to-reel tape recorder to expose us to the sound of “Mandarin” Chinese being spoken . Our reaction was one of knee-slapping whoops and wild hilarity . We fell about laughing , not only at our first exposure to spoken Chinese , but at the preposterous notion that we could learn it .

The class size plummeted on the second day , with 20 defectors . The remaining 20 of us had decent intentions , but were easily swayed by the

antics of a handful of agents provocateur among us , who perpetrated all manner of tricks on our dedicated but gullible teacher .

When Teacher Guo announced that an examination would be held the following Wednesday , one quick-witted classmate objected to this unilateral pronouncement . He countered that in America , important decisions are arrived at through a democratic process . Teacher Guo conceded the point out of respect for American traditions . This set into motion a complex voting process which achieved the dual objectives of wasting class time in an entertaining manner , and postponing the big exam for a week .

The same fellow covered for a chronically absentee classmate by stating he was away from Chinese class so often because his wife had just given birth to another child -- their third -- and he was working multiple jobs to make ends meet . He provided documentary support for this spurious yarn with a selection of random baby pictures he had collected on the school bus . The truth was that the lanky , unmarried and childless 15-year old was once again out in the parking lot smoking cigarettes .

Somehow despite the goofing around , my interest in studying the language and culture grew . As college applications approached , I sought a university with a good Chinese program .

One piece of advice from my late Father while I was in high school was that no matter what career path I chose , good verbal and written communication skills are essential to success . Wise words , which I took to heart .

Around the same time , my late Mom offered a remarkable insight while I was doing homework at the dining table . I'd been studying Chinese for about one year at this stage.

“I know what’s going to happen to you, “ she said confidently , with a far-away gaze .

“What ?!” I asked .

“You’re going to go off to China , you’re going to marry a Chinese girl , and you’re never coming back .”

This sounded like the most ridiculous thing I’d ever heard , and I respectfully said so . In hindsight , however , as far-fetched as it sounded to me at the time , it was a case of eerily prescient maternal insight , because her prediction came true .

As graduation from high school approached , I had a growing sense that there would be a need for qualified people to join an eventual dialogue between China and the U.S.

I had become sports editor of the high school paper , and entertained visions of becoming a foreign correspondent , combining my interest in journalism with Chinese studies .

I applied to two universities , both with good Chinese studies programs as well as foreign service schools , since the diplomatic service also seemed a possible career path . I knew I did not have a calling for the laundry business .

After being admitted to and enrolled at Princeton , I chose East Asian Studies as my major rather than the Woodrow Wilson School , because it offered more flexibility in curricular choices . I didn’t fully realize it yet , but this choice also exposed me to an extraordinary group of scholars and educators , in Chinese language , literature , history and culture .

I chose education as my minor . I did my student teaching , and in 1973 became the first teacher of Chinese at the secondary and primary levels to be certified by the State of New Jersey Department of Education .

Because I was the first , that part of the certification process requiring a certified teacher in the subject to observe and “pass” the applicant could not be satisfied . The far-sighted state education authorities ruled that I would be allowed to observe myself , which I gladly did . As far as I could tell , I merited a pass .

“He’s the guy who studies Chinese” was my tenuous claim to fame in university days . Studying Chinese was still considered an unusual and difficult endeavor , and those who studied it were somehow viewed as very bright . The more I studied , the less I subscribed to this view . It seemed to me that Chinese was in some respects easier than English .

During my university years -- the early 1970s -- the I-Ching , Tao Te-Ching and the Beat Poets were very much in vogue . Ancient Chinese philosophy and literature were becoming “cool” among a growing number of young Americans .

Princeton did not offer journalism courses , but had begun an outstanding creative writing program . I enrolled in a one semester seminar with the late , great British writer Anthony Burgess ; and extended for a second semester . That was the year that his novel “A Clockwork Orange” was made into a hit film by Stanley Kubrick , which propelled him to a new level of fame in the U.S. , despite the fact that he had received a one-off payment of only \$350 for the film rights .

Burgess was an accomplished student of linguistics as well as a composer . He noted with interest that I had studied modern and ancient Chinese , ancient Greek , Latin and Sanskrit . During one conversation in his office , he strongly encouraged me to keep copious notes of writing ideas , warning that failure to do so would result in the loss of a lot of valuable raw material in later years . I became even more of a committed diarist and note-taker .

Some of my classmates had the opportunity to spend a summer or junior year abroad , studying Chinese in Taiwan . In the early 1970s , the Chinese mainland was still essentially off-limits to American students .

I was unable to pursue a study abroad option due to job commitments on campus and during the summers . This was somewhat frustrating , because after years of study , I had still not been in an environment outside the classroom where I could use my Chinese language . I knew my verbal skills would benefit greatly from an immersive experience .

The closest I got while still in the U.S. was the exceptionally good intensive summer program in Chinese studies at Middlebury College in Vermont , which required a signed pledge to speak only Chinese for the duration of the 8-week program .

Classrooms and language labs can take one's verbal and listening skills only so far . Breaking through that ceiling requires daily language use in a real life environment . That's what I was missing .

The job market in 1973 , the year I graduated from Princeton , was by all accounts pretty dismal . Add to this my uncertainty about next steps career-wise , and I found myself in a quandary . Princeton's career counselling service didn't have much advice to offer East Asian Studies majors . It seemed like the majority of my graduating classmates had clear game plans , confident they wanted to pursue careers in law , medicine , academia , business , or whatever , while I was still undecided . This kind of anxiety was new to me , and gave me the jitters .

I was interested in journalism but had no practical working experience . Education appealed to me , but I was unsure what a satisfying niche would be . Above all , I wanted to work in a field which gave me the chance to use my Chinese language skills . That was virtually impossible in the U.S.

at the time . I did not want to pursue an advanced degree, although I considered it an option for the future .

US news media had no bureaus in China , nor did US companies have offices there . The migration of US multinational company Asia-Pacific head offices from Tokyo to Hong Kong had begun , but mainland China was still hermetically sealed , and not yet even considered a market .

My part-time and summer jobs had included working in restaurants as a busboy (starting at the pre-legal age of 12), waiter, and short-order cook; worker on a sailboat production line ; light-show operator in a rock concert hall ; heavy construction equipment operator ; assistant in Princeton's Firestone Library graphic arts collection ; house painter , caddy at a golf club , and landscaper . None of these seemed to offer a natural segue into a career path .

In my search for a job which would enable me to use my Chinese , I even applied for a position at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington , D.C. , where the Chinese diplomatic mission was based prior to the normalization of US-China relations and establishment of the first Chinese Embassy in Washington . At the time this was possibly the largest concentration of Putonghua speakers in one building in the United States .

I filled out an application in the Mayflower's cavernous ground floor HR office and sat in line along the wall behind 20-odd other applicants . The HR lady reviewed one application form at a time , calling out the candidate's name , followed by a brief face to face talk at her desk . I reckoned at the rate she was going , I would be waiting at least 2 hours .

To my surprise , she called my name a few minutes later . I made my way forward and followed her gesture to be seated .

With an incredulous expression , she asked “**Let me get this straight** ...you just graduated from Princeton with a degree in Asian studies *and you wanna work as a busboy in this hotel?*”

Clearly she thought I was suffering from a massive ambition deficit .

I explained that I’d studied Chinese and was hoping there might be a job where I could use the language in serving the needs of the Chinese mission who were residents of the hotel ... blah , blah , blah . My answer appeared to elevate her appraisal of me to one small notch above the level of “nutcase” , but her expression remained quizzical .

“Wait over there.”

She made a phone call .

A few minutes later , she told me to proceed to the Executive Offices to meet Mr. So-and-so , the Assistant General Manager of the Hotel , which of course I did . He was a very nice gentleman who tried to persuade me to consider a promising career in the hotel and hospitality field , but was unable to offer a position in which I could use my Chinese . Game over .

The search continued , and my frustration grew . I needed an income . I wondered whether all the years of Chinese studies were ever going to connect with a career path , or just end up in archives of unusual past achievements .

Several months before , I had called on an employment agency specializing in media jobs . The head honcho was kind enough to meet me , but told me frankly that my Princeton degree and Chinese language skill would be of zero help in finding a journalism job in such a down market , especially since I lacked practical work experience . I’d heard this from prospective media employers as well , so was losing hope in finding an opening in the field .

To my surprise , he telephoned me some weeks later , and said he had lined up a possible job interview for me , for an editorial position with a trade association . Initially elated , my heart sank when he told me the prospective employer was the National Association of Truck Stop Operators . I was more than happy to consider an entry-level editorial position unconnected with China or Asia . However , I thought my chances of passing muster with the truckstoppers , as a longish-haired recent Ivy League graduate , were slim to nil .

The interview went far better than I'd expected , and I was offered the post of assistant editor . My boss was an experienced journalist as well as government affairs professional .

Later , he asked me if I knew why he'd chosen me for the job , since he had a short list of applicants with 3-5 years' editorial experience .

I said I had no idea . He said “ Someone with a degree in Chinese from Princeton must be the smartest cookie of the group .”

This was another “I don't really think that's true , but I'm not going to argue the point “ moment . Studying Chinese had once again given me a much-needed competitive advantage , deservedly or not .

After a few months on the job , although I was writing , learning a lot about editing , layout and publication production , and gotten a promotion , I'd been away from Chinese language classes for a long time . I was alarmed at the speed with which my Chinese vocabulary was evaporating . I sensed that before too long , a “fish or cut bait ” moment was approaching as far as Chinese studies and my career path were concerned .

I grew more restless and found my mind wandering to Chinese Asia , which for me really meant Taiwan and Hong Kong . Taiwan was the obvious preferred choice from a language viewpoint , but there remained

some practical challenges , such as finding the funds to get there , and the means to support myself once I arrived .

As I reached the one year mark on the job , I was inclined to roll the dice and head for Asia . I had saved enough money for a one-way airplane ticket from the west coast , and figured through freelance writing , English tutoring , etc. I could find a way to make ends meet in Taiwan .

I didn't seriously consider Hong Kong because it was a haven of Cantonese and English . I wanted a Putonghua speaking environment .

Several things happened that Spring which helped me finalize my decision to go .

I'd consulted the I-Ching several times . The resulting hexagrams and my reflections on them centered on new beginnings and the good fortune that can result from perseverance . This gave me a positive sense .

I also had an extremely vivid dream , centered around an epic journey to Asia , including China . I met a great Chinese mentor from whom I learned many lessons , followed by a series of fulfilling developments in life and work . The dream portrayed a long and happy odyssey .

When I woke , I knew it was time to stop cutting bait , and go fishing . Asia beckoned .

I gave notice to my employer , and began searching for freelance writing opportunities . I told editors that I would be travelling to Taiwan via Japan and then Hong Kong , and that my Chinese skills would be an asset in reporting and writing .

I derived great (and wholly unfounded) encouragement from the fact that an editor I knew at National Geographic agreed to take a look on spec at several story ideas which I proposed . This meant a lot to me at the time .

Later I found out that this was the standard response offered to just about anybody with half a story idea . Still , the confidence boost was timely .

I had begun writing a novel set in the world of truckers and truck stop operators . Since my savings would be nearly eaten up by a one-way air ticket from the west coast , the idea of hitch-hiking across the country offered dual benefits : cheap transportation , as well as the chance to gather more material for my novel .

In the final few weeks before leaving , I found friends were generally supportive of my plan , although some questioned the wisdom of travelling halfway around the world without a job , contacts on the ground , or savings to support myself once I got there .

I was less fixated on the risk than the adventure . The day before I left , I played softball with a group of friends . It was the bottom of the ninth , and my team was down by two runs . I was at bat with bases loaded , and two out . The count ran up to three and two . I hit a grand slam home run - possibly the only one of my baseball career -- and we won .

Clearly a sucker for omens , I took this as yet another positive indicator about my coming journey .

Long distance hitch-hiking was generally more efficient if you made a sign stating your destination in letters large enough for passing motorists to see .

I began to write my destination --“Vancouver”-- on a sheet of cardboard . It struck me that a better option would be to write “Hong Kong” . I’d probably be the only hitch-hiker with a “Hong Kong” sign on I-80 westbound on that day , and possibly for the remainder of human history . It worked well , getting me rides in fairly short order , and prompting lively conversations .

One motorist stopped , offered me a ride , and said “You really goin’ to Hong Kong ? Ain’t you goin’ the wrong way ?” I said yes , and no .

I arrived at Hong Kong’s old Kai Tak airport on a sultry mid-August day in 1974 . Stepping out of the airplane onto the tarmac was like being enveloped in a soaking wet electric blanket . I made my way to the YMCA in Tsimshatsui , next to the posh Peninsula Hotel . I had about US\$150 in my pocket , plus my backpack , tent , sleeping bag , and a 4-piece fishing rod .

The next day I telephoned my sole job lead in Hong Kong , a Chinese entrepreneur with publishing and other business interests , to whom I’d sent a letter and resume . I knew almost nothing about him .

I inquired over the telephone about the possibility of arranging a job interview . He said “No”. I was disappointed that my sole job lead in Hong Kong appeared to have flamed out in less than 2 minutes .

To my total surprise , he added : “You can start work tomorrow.” I was flummoxed by the quick progression from rejection to job offer over the phone , from someone I’d never met . I also had no suitable work clothes .

He cut through my hemming and hawing , and suggested I drop by his office the next day for a chat . I gratefully accepted . We had an enjoyable and enlightening talk , during which he offered to be a good mentor , and converse with me frequently in his native dialect , Putonghua . He added that the pay wouldn’t be much , but enough for me to survive on . That sounded fine to me , and I accepted .

It was a Saturday morning . He asked me if I was free for lunch . I laughed and said “Of course . You are the only person I know in Hong Kong .” He kindly brought me along to his Saturday luncheon group , called “Alcoholics Anonymous” , which included many iconic , veteran

foreign correspondents : Derek Davies , Richard Hughes , Anthony Paul , Anthony Lawrence , etc. He was clearly well connected , and not drawn to the group by alcohol , since he was a lifetime teetotaler .

He introduced me as a recent graduate from Princeton in Chinese studies , who had the guts to come all the way to Hong Kong with no job and virtually no contacts . He later opined that no young Chinese man would risk a journey of that sort . It hadn't struck me as that big a risk .

I learned many valuable lessons during the next year from this fine gentleman , Stephen Zhou . It was 1974 , and even in Hong Kong , China was perceived as still being sealed off behind an imposing “bamboo curtain” . Trade between China and Hong Kong was rudimentary , yet he had the foresight to anticipate a future in which that would change dramatically .

He envisioned a day when the Cultural Revolution would come to an end , and China would become more open , focused more on economic growth and less on extreme ideology . One of the commercial opportunities he foresaw was publishing technical magazines to introduce western industry to China .

Undaunted by the skepticism of others , Zhou launched several industrial magazines , published and printed in Hong Kong , in simplified Chinese characters : “European Industrial Report” , and “American Industrial Report” .

Although his companies had other business lines - a public relations consultancy with blue chip clients like Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation , Towngas , Kodak , etc.; print pre-production services ; translation ; and a freight forwarding company - the magazines were what piqued my interest .

When he passed away in 1975 after a brief bout with cancer , he was far too young to have given any thought to a succession plan . His various companies had different shareholders and directors , and the situation in the wake of his sudden death quickly became chaotic .

I had worked for him for about one year . Given the uncertainty after his passing , I was seriously thinking about returning to the U.S. to pursue a further degree . Two considerations persuaded me to forego that option .

First , as his right hand man , Mr. Zhang , reminded me , Mr. Zhou had a been a very good boss and mentor to us . He had left a wife and three young children behind , in an era when most Chinese did not believe in buying life insurance . Zhang suggested we speak with his widow to better understand her plans and needs . Point very well taken , and we began a series of conversations .

In those discussions with his widow , Rose Zhou , we discovered a shared passion for publishing , as opposed to the PR agency and other business lines . We were also well aware that while we were long on vision , we were very short on capital .

The second factor which helped persuade me to stay was the opportunity to make my first trip to the Chinese mainland , to attend the Chinese Export Commodities Fair in Guangzhou (Canton) . This was an unforgettable first foray into China at a time when very few foreigners were able to visit . The Cultural Revolution was still raging .

On my first morning in China , I was awakened at 6 a.m. by loudspeakers in the streets around the Dong Fang Hotel blaring out the thoughts of Chairman Mao and the current Party line , which happened to include denunciation of the American imperialists and their running dogs . For a fleeting moment I envisioned a cartoon image of myself as a loping

Golden Retriever wearing an Uncle Sam hat . After all those years of studying Chinese , this was a memorably hostile welcome message .

Hostile or not , the opportunity to travel to China had previously been unimaginable , and was very exciting .

Once we decided to pursue the publishing business idea , we obtained an advance payment from a European publishing client of Mr. Zhou's for a major translation and printing project , and set up shop as a publishing and translation company focused on the China market .That was 1975.

We were idealistic and focused more on making a difference and doing something groundbreaking than we were on making a fortune .

The small circle of so-called old China hands in the traditional British and European trading “hongs” in Hong Kong - Jardines , East Asiatic , Hutchison , Jebsens , etc. - thought our business concept woefully premature , since the Cultural Revolution showed no obvious signs of abating . They were also jealous of any commercial intrusions into their exclusive role as modern compradors in China's trade with the outside world .

We were confident our business concept was sound . What we could not know was whether we were 12 months premature , or 12 years . The survival of our business would depend on the answer to that question.

Luckily , revenues began to take off quickly after about one year , due to a variety of political and economic factors . Demand for industrial advertising , as well as technical translation and typesetting into simplified Chinese characters , was on the upswing . China had begun importing a wider range of industrial equipment and materials . Within a few years , we began publishing new , more specialized Chinese language technical journals , in construction , mining , machine tools , agriculture , etc.

My continuing travels to the Chinese mainland enabled me to witness first-hand the extraordinary transitions which began in the late 1970s , leading up to China's Open Door policy in 1979 . This was long before the 5-star hotels , high-speed rail links , and other luxurious creature comforts for travelers arrived in China .

The Canton Fair , held once in the Spring and once in the Fall , was essentially the only game in town for foreign business visitors , who were generally required to stay at the old Dong Fang Hotel . In the mid-70s , guest rooms lacked air conditioning or telephones , but better rooms in the old wing featured ceiling to floor mosquito nets suspended above the bed .

By 1978 , the Canton Fair had been “discovered” , and the Dong Fang was quickly overwhelmed by surging visitor numbers . The management felt the need to upgrade quality and service .

It had become clear through a consistent volume of complaints that foreign visitors were not too happy sharing their rooms with jumbo cockroaches . Along came an enterprising American company offering to solve this problem with state-of-the-art industrial bug bombs . A sale was made .

Unfortunately , the law of unintended consequences reared its ugly head , at this very early stage of China's march to modernization .

The bug bombs were deployed in the bowels of the “Fang” , as it was fondly referred to . As the Fair opened , returning guests were delighted to discover that the giant cockroaches were gone . That was the good news .

The bad news was that the pesticides made life in the basement unpleasant for the rats , who swarmed upstairs into every corner of the

guest rooms , hallways , and dining facilities - a mass migration of vermin fit for an Alfred Hitchcock thriller .

Rats were scampering hither and yon . A good friend - and schoolmate in Chinese studies -- was asleep in his room during this lemming march . He left the electric fan on his bedside table turned on as he slept . In the wee hours came a caterwauling , with a bing-bang-bing-bong percussion riff, causing him to blearily switch on the light . To his horror , he confronted a now deceased rat which must have had acrobatic aspirations , causing it to plummet down from the wall and into his table fan . Suspended inside the cage as the fan blade spun , *Rattus Rattus* was being sliced , diced , and distributed - fur , tail and whiskers -- right into his face . Screaming , he ran in his shorts to the service desk on that floor of the Fang , where two young Chinese women attendants were sound asleep .

The sight of a thundering incoming semi-clad foreigner at 3 am would have offered sufficient shock value , but to compound their bewilderment , the approaching ghost was repeating something about an “old book” in his room . It sounded as if an old book in his room had awakened him and caused him to run half naked , bellowing , towards their work station .

Or was it something else ? The culprit turned out to be the fact that the Chinese words for “rat” sound the same as those for “old book” , except for the decisive fact that the tones are different . Easy enough to mispronounce , especially in a moment of high anxiety . My friend had intended to alert them to a rat in his room , while instead whooping about an old book .

In the end the young ladies disposed of the rat in a rather matter of fact manner , no doubt concluding that we foreigners are an easily excitable and rather odd bunch .

In Hong Kong , rather than socialize primarily in the colonial era expatriate circles , I chose to live on one of Hong Kong's outer islands , Cheung Chau . A peaceful one-hour ferry ride from Central District , the island was a charming fishing village which still had pockets of rice paddies and small plot agriculture . Rents were a fraction of Hong Kong island's , and it was a small enough community that you could get to know your neighbors , shopkeepers , police , etc. When I moved there , the non-Chinese population numbered less than 20 , out of roughly 20,000 in total . I lived in a village house with a garden and lovely views of the South China Sea .

After initially resisting the urge to learn Cantonese - a notoriously difficult dialect -- for fear of somehow short-circuiting my Putonghua , I eventually decided it was time . I acquired an excellent self-study program with texts and audiotapes produced by Hong Kong's government broadcaster , RTHK . I put the daily commuting time each weekday to fairly good use .

Despite these efforts , my Cantonese has never reached a level equivalent to my Putonghua . It remains good enough to get me into trouble .

During the colonial era , not many foreigners spoke Cantonese . Prior to Hong Kong's handover in 1997 , I had a recurring conversational gambit with a number of Hong Kong taxi drivers , in response to my engaging them in Cantonese .

Taxi driver (in Cantonese) : “Wah . Good Cantonese .Are you a cop ?”
(Of Hong Kong's many British civil servants , it was mainly the police who spoke Cantonese well .)

Me (in Cantonese) : “Thank you . Nope.”

Driver : “Mormon missionary ?” (Pairs of earnest young white-shirted Mormon missionaries were a common sight on Hong Kong streets . They

hit the ground speaking excellent Cantonese after their immersion programs in Utah.)

Me: “Nope.”

Driver : “American ?”

“Yep.”

The perception seemed to be that North Americans were less encumbered by colonial attitudes insofar as learning the local language was concerned .

Learning Cantonese after Putonghua made the relative complexity of Cantonese a bit easier to master . Getting a grip on Cantonese enhanced my feeling of comfort towards life and work in Hong Kong , as learning any local language does . Hong Kong people are favorably impressed by a foreigner who can read and write Chinese , and speak Putonghua , but the addition of Cantonese skills into the mix prompts reactions of wonder .

Apart from the dividends to one’s ego , this enhances the respect one is shown in a wide variety of contexts . Acquiring language skills conveys respect for local culture . That mutual respect is the foundation for successful relationships , which are important anywhere but especially in Chinese society .

China’s Open Door policy was an inflection point for the growth of our business , further cementing my interest in retaining a front-row seat for the dynamic and exciting changes which were unfolding in China , and in China’s relations with the world . Before I knew it , I’d passed the ten-year mark in Hong Kong . We were publishing several dozen different Chinese language magazines . We’d established a consulting division and some other ancillary service lines .

A few years after that I married Jenny Chen Ching , a native of Beijing , fulfilling my mother's prophecy some two decades before . We've now been very happily married nearly thirty years , partnered in life , family-raising , and work .

Apart from my day job , I became active in the American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong . I made quite a few friends , while keeping abreast of developments in China through luncheon speakers , seminars , and delegation visits . I participated in government affairs efforts , aimed at improving mutual understanding between the Chinese and U.S. governments .

By the time I passed my 20-year mark in Hong Kong , I was chosen to be the Chairman of the Chamber , a volunteer position most often reserved for senior executives of large companies . I think my Chinese studies background was an important factor in my being selected despite being a small business owner .

I volunteered to serve on a parent-teacher committee at the Hong Kong International School aimed at improving the quality of the school's Chinese language instruction . Later I was asked to serve on the school board , and eventually to be board chair. Once again , my Chinese studies background was a differentiator , as Hong Kong approached its big transition in 1997.

After 20 years of publishing trade and technical magazines , there were signs of dramatic change on the horizon in the China market . After a strategic planning off-site with our whole staff (including colleagues from our Beijing and Shanghai offices) , we decided to make a major change in direction , towards China's soon-to-emerge consumer market .

We disengaged from technical , business to business magazines to focus on an exciting new project , which was launching the Chinese edition of

FORTUNE Magazine under license from Time Inc. We were their first licensee .

First published at the end of 1996 , FORTUNE China was built on an innovative business model . Printed and published in Hong Kong , it was the first high-profile global brand magazine introduced to China through Hong Kong . There were skeptics , who said the Chinese government would not permit this approach since Hong Kong periodicals were subject to far fewer regulatory controls than those published within the mainland per se . It was satisfying to prove them wrong .

Now in its 20th year of publication , in print , with online and mobile offshoots as well as events , FORTUNE China has been a great success .

Founding , growing and running a media business in Hong Kong and China during 40 years of phenomenal social , economic and political change involved managing through plenty of ups and downs .

Navigating successfully through sometimes troubled waters would have been exponentially more challenging without Chinese language skills , and the cultural insight which accompanies them .

I will share my perspectives on some aspects of culture which learning the language helped unlock for me , with the caveat that sweeping generalizations about Chinese culture are often flawed . Local and regional sub-cultures are many , united to some extent by common values , yet buffeted by powerful winds of change .

Improving one's listening skills sits at the crossroads of Chinese language learning and acquisition of cross-cultural sensitivity . Chinese is a relatively subtle spoken language , in which tonality differentiates meaning . Chinese culture is also nuanced . If we Americans are known for our directness , Chinese people tend to behave at the more indirect

end of the spectrum . Becoming a better listener applies not only to Chinese but to one's Mother Tongue .

Arrogance , or perceived arrogance , is seen as a manifestation of lack of respect for others . In the absence of demonstrable mutual respect , solutions to problems may be elusive . In times past - such as the early days of China's Open Door era , or in Hong Kong's colonial times -- Chinese people tended to be forgiving of arrogant foreigners . Those days are long gone . It has also become more common for foreigners to have to deal with arrogant Chinese , which is a relatively new phenomenon . Either way , arrogance is a veritable banana peel .

In spoken and written communications , Chinese protocol calls for very polite and deferential terms of address , to an extent that we Americans find unnatural . We are easily fatigued by what seems excessively flowery and flattering artifice .

This intersects another dimension of cultural norms , which is the perception of time . That we Americans tend to be in a hurry is a stereotype rooted in reality . By contrast , Chinese people excel at playing the long game . Being in too great a hurry can weaken one's ability to find the most effective solutions to a problem . Equally , it can undermine one's patience to communicate effectively in delicate situations .

Patience is one of those virtues which is deeply rooted in Chinese culture , as is calm in the face of conflict . Losing your cool is considered a sign of weakness .

We Americans place a very high value on individuality . In a fiercely competitive situation , we tend to have no compunctions about "killing" the other side as part of the end game . Chinese are more inclined towards thinking in terms of a group . Rather than fight the opponent to

the death , they are more likely to leave them a final escape route . Win , but allow the enemy to survive .

The above examples are by no means intended as a thorough or systematic collection of cultural insights which accompanied my Chinese language learning process . The key point is that to learn the language is to learn the culture , to a greater or lesser extent . Whether or how this impacts your behavior is of course a matter of personal choice .

Career satisfaction is about much more than income or fame . Finding something you are passionate about and can excel at , and leveraging it to make a contribution to improving the world in some small way , is hugely rewarding .

In mid-2016 , we concluded the sale of our publishing company to Time Inc . I retired as Chairman and Editor-in-Chief of FORTUNE China . At the time of this writing , I have lived in Hong Kong 42 years , nearly 20 years' longer than in my native U.S.A.

I remain active on the boards of some non-profit organizations , including the Amcham Charitable Foundation , the Asia-Pacific Council of The Nature Conservancy , International Social Service Hong Kong , and the Duihua Foundation .

In retrospect , studying Chinese has had a phenomenal impact on my career , as well as on who I am today .

I am deeply grateful to the many gifted and dedicated Chinese teachers I was fortunate to learn from .

That includes , of course , Teacher Guo , whom I tracked down and exchanged letters with in later years . It seemed only fair to thank him and to reassure him that despite our youthful shenanigans way back when , his efforts had not been entirely in vain .

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