

「無巧不成書」--何瞻的故事

“Synchronicity is a concept, first explained by psychiatrist Carl Jung, which holds that events are ‘meaningful coincidences’ if they occur with no causal relationship, yet seem to be meaningfully related.”

Richard Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 50.

Many years ago, while studying Chinese language and literature in graduate school, I encountered the expression *wuqiao bucheng shu* 無巧不成書. As you all know, this phrase uses a conditional-type grammatical structure (“if ... then ...”) to summarize an event or experience that happened completely by chance. There is no precise English equivalent, but something like “A good story is never predictable” seems to get across the meaning. And why do I invoke this particular expression at the start of my essay? Well, after receiving the initial clarion call from Professor Link to attend this honorable gathering and speak about how my Chinese language skills have made a difference in my life and career, one thought immediately came to mind and has refused to leave me ever since: it all happened completely by accident.

Now, before I map out some of the key coincidences in my life that led to what has been a wonderful career as a sinologist, in the interest of full disclosure I should first confess that I have a China connection in my family background. As a

very young man back in the early 1940s, my father responded to want ad that appeared in a local newspaper in New York City. The ad read something like this:

“Wanted: Road Engineers for Construction Work Overseas.

Good pay. No College Degree Required.”

As my father later told and retold the story (way too many times!), he would never have seen this advertisement if a co-worker had not randomly brought it to his attention in a casual conversation. Young and apparently quite adventurous, Dad responded and, after a brief interview, landed a “construction job overseas”; more specifically, in China. His official employer, as it turned out, was the Ministry of Defense (Guofang bu 國防部), and his first posting was to Chengdu. The way Dad described the job to me later went something like this: “After the Japs would bomb the various airfields around Chengdu (there were several of them), it was our job (he had a crew of local Chinese laborers helping him) to repair the tarmac damage so the P-40s could take off and shoot down the Jap bombers.” I never knew what “P-40” meant until much later. These aircraft, in fact, were the fighter planes used by General Claire Chennault’s (Chinese name: 陳納德) Flying Tigers (飛虎隊), also known as the “American Volunteer Group” (美國志願大隊). During World War II, they collectively shot down approximately 2,500 Japanese aircraft.

Now, although my father never studied the Chinese language in any kind of formal, educational setting, he communicated pretty well (though he was toneless) with his work crew by drawing on a stable of stock phrases and key vocabulary he had memorized. Among his favorite expressions were “日本鬼子,” “敵人的飛機,” “總會有辦法,” “開始工作,” “快點, 快點, 時間有限!”

After the war, Dad settled in Brooklyn and worked various jobs, all related to construction (he never did get that college degree). Then, in the early 1960s, another chance happening: while having lunch at a Chinese restaurant in New York City (true story!) Dad ran into an old Kuomintang 國民黨 buddy from Chongqing, who told him about some “construction opportunities” in Taiwan “for big money.” By this time, we were already a family of five. I remember how Mom—a Brooklyn-born girl of Scotch-Irish descent—was resolutely opposed to “moving to the jungles of Thailand” (at first, she could not distinguish between “Thailand” and “Taiwan;” and sometimes it even seemed that she thought that New Jersey was a foreign country). To this day, I am not sure how Dad convinced her to go, but all of us eventually did move to Taiwan. And Dad did indeed make some “big money” working on the roads that still take tourists through Taroko Gorge 太魯閣.

We were assigned to live a nice little house in an area called Haiyou cun 海友村, which was situated next to the ROC Naval Base in Zuoying 左營 (outside Gaoxiong), but initially there was no air conditioning and only “Japanese-style” toilets. Still, our Chinese hosts always referred to this little “bungalow” as 何家別墅. I distinctly remember the flying roaches (蟑螂) in our “villa,” and the long green snakes in the backyard. After only two weeks “in the jungle of Thailand,” my mother, brothers, and I were all on a plane back to Brooklyn.

My mom and brothers never returned to Taiwan. Dad, however, continued to work there, on and off (mostly “on”), for about ten years. During that time he insisted that I visit often (I was the youngest child and his favorite, so I could not oppose his wishes), but honestly ... I hated it. No television, no rock-and-roll radio stations, no American-style football, only bugs and snakes and more bugs and snakes. I did, however, make some Chinese friends (all of them were from families of transplanted Mainlanders) and actually did okay learning to speak a little Mandarin, but I made little progress in reading and none in writing. When Dad’s job was over and he finally returned to Brooklyn, the “Taiwan Story” was over and done with. The family eventually moved to Connecticut (another “construction” job), where I attended high school and the University of Bridgeport. At the time, I

never imagined that “Taiwan” or any of this “China stuff” would play any role whatsoever in my life.

During my sophomore year in college my father decided that it would be a good idea for me to become a lawyer. He never said exactly why he thought this would be a good career path, but I have always assumed it was about the “big money” a good “shysta” could earn (my parent’s generation in Brooklyn always referred to lawyers as “shystas,” which derives from a German word meaning someone who acts in a unethical or unscrupulous way, especially in the practice of law). In any case, this led me to choose Political Science as my major. One of the required classes for this major was PS 201, or Comparative Politics. The instructor was a young man with fiery red hair named William Howard Taft, Jr. (he was in a distant relative of our 27th president). He assigned term-paper topics to everyone in the class. Quite by chance, then, I just happen to be given the topic: “The Sino-Soviet Split.” As I read more and more on the subject, and with a lot of encouragement from Mr. Taft, I became more and more interested in “China stuff.” I am still unclear about what precisely sparked this interest. Was it my earlier experiences in Taiwan? I don’t think so. With the exceptions of the friendships I had made there, those memories were not positive. In any case, although I had done well in high school, for the first time in my life I was really interested in

something *academic*. This led me to take several additional undergraduate classes on Chinese history, taught by Professor Wu Weiping 吳衛平 (who, as it turned out, was the son-in-law of the famous Harvard China historian Yang Liansheng 楊聯升). By senior year I was totally hooked on “China stuff.” I think I read John King Fairbank’s *The United States and China* at least three times.

When graduation time came around, I realized that I had absolutely no interest in becoming a “shysta.” To say that Dad was disappointed about this decision would be a gross understatement. He kept asking the same question over and over: “How can you make money and support a family by knowing about “China stuff”? I didn’t have an answer. Professor Wu suggested that I might think about some formal Chinese language study and perhaps go for a master’s degree in “China Studies” ... at least until I figured out what I wanted to do with my life. Again, I had no idea of where any of this might lead, but even before graduation I had already made two, critical moves: I signed up for an intensive summer first-year Chinese class at Washington University in St. Louis, and applied to the Master’s program in “Oriental Studies” at the University of Arizona (Professor Wu had previously taught there).

To my surprise, the Chinese language instructor at Washington University (St. Louis) that summer was an American named Gary Tipton who, during the

regular academic year, taught at Arizona State University. For eight weeks that summer I attended his classes and marveled at how well he spoke Mandarin with his native Chinese teaching assistant. Professor Tipton instantly became my first, “real life role model.” I wanted to “grow up and be just like him.” I did quite well in my language study that summer, but the idea of having a career as a sinologist or professional language teacher had never, ever crossed my mind, probably because I was not sure if I had the “right stuff.” I knew absolutely nothing about teaching, except for what I had observed from my own teachers. Before I left St. Louis for Tucson, I asked Professor Tipton where he had attended graduate school. His reply was “Indiana University.” I wondered: “What does Indiana have to do with “China stuff”? Isn’t Indiana all about basketball?

As it turned out, the focus of the master’s program at the University Arizona was more on modern history and contemporary politics. By now, however, my main interest was Chinese language, literature, and culture. Professor Tipton suggested that I check out Indiana. I did so and it looked promising: lots of language and literature classes, and even a class on Tang poetry! I applied, got in, and even got some financial support. The next fall I was in Bloomington.

The teachers with whom I worked with at Indiana—mainly Professors Wu-chi Liu (Liu Wuji 柳無忌教授; he was the son of Liu Yazi 柳亞子, who some of

you might know from his friendship with Mao Zedong and his work with the Nanshe 南社), Irving Y. C. Lo (Luo Yuzheng 羅郁正教授), and Eugene Eoyang (Ouyang Zhen 歐陽楨教授)—had a profound influence on my life and career. I would not be standing here right now if it was not for their encouragement and support. To be honest, to this day I still do not know why I deserved it (with the benefit of hindsight, I see now that I received more attention than most other graduate students in the department). Sure, it was their job to help and guide students—this is what mentors are supposed to do. But the relationship I had with my teachers, especially with Professor and Mrs. Lo (羅師母), was much, much more than that. Professor Lo treated me like a son. This dedication I wrote to him in my Mount Emei book reads as follows: 師恩難忘 , 惠澤終生. Professor Lo and my other teachers at Indiana also introduced me to the wonderful world of traditional Chinese literature, and it was there where I not only found great interest, but more importantly—passion. The various texts we call *guwen* 古文 have fascinated me ever since.

Another random event: at the start of the fall semester of my second year at Indiana, one of the first-year Chinese TAs (a woman from Taiwan) became ill and a replacement was needed right away. Professor Lo recommended me to the

Chinese Language Coordinator and I landed the job. But there was no supervision, no training, no time for observation of other teachers, nothing. I was just told: “Just go teach the drill class for Chinese 101.” With no teaching experience on which to draw from, I did what I suppose many of you may have also done: I attempted to imitate the teaching technique of who I thought was my best Chinese language teacher. This was Mr. Kuo Tien-k’un (Guo Diankun 郭殿坤), who was my third-year language teacher in the Chinese Summer School at Middlebury College in 1973 (so long ago!). 郭老師 embodied—on a level far beyond the “normal” — those qualities shared by all great teachers: (1) he always had total command of the classroom; (2) he was able to communicate well with every student in the class; (3) he reminded us constantly that it is okay to make a grammar mistake or get a tone wrong, just be vigilant and correct it; and if that effort takes more than one try, that is okay as well; (4) he always explained grammar and vocabulary usage in terms that students could understand; and (5) 郭老師 had way of projecting his “student-friendly” personality in way that made everyone in class feel at ease. He did this through humor and a tone of voice that always sounded friendly and encouraging. This, in my view, is the most ideal learning environment. Well, throughout my four years as a Teaching Assistant at Indiana I made every effort to mimic everything about 郭老師’s approach to teaching.

To my great surprise, the first-year Chinese language students at Indiana gave me high grades for my drill-class teaching. This gave me tremendous encouragement. Maybe, just maybe, I really could “grow up” to be like Professor Tipton or 郭老師 or Professor Lo or Professor Eoyang? Again, with encouragement from my teachers at Indiana, I went on to earn a doctoral degree, and thereafter taught at Middlebury (regular year program and the summer school), Colorado, and Princeton-in-Beijing. I eventually settled into a position at the University at Albany, State University of New York (the person who hired me at UAlbany is Charles Hartman, who was a classmate of Gary Tipton’s at Indiana!) and I have spent the bulk of my career there.

Now that I have bored you with a lot of dry, boring background information, I now turn to the central question we were asked to address: What difference has learning Chinese made in my professional work? There are many possible responses I could give to this question, but let’s begin with *the* most fundamental answer: if I had not done well in my study of modern Chinese (especially speaking) and classical Chinese (mainly, reading and translating), I would never have had a career as a sinologist and language teacher. I say this because there is no doubt whatsoever that speaking modern Chinese well was responsible for me landing my first, professional teaching position: this was a one-year, sabbatical replacement gig in the regular year program at Middlebury College. Years later,

the late Gregory Chiang [姜貴格], who was a colleague at Middlebury that year, told me that I got the job essentially because I was able to identify his family name Jiang 姜 by reciting the following: “姜太公的姜 姜太公釣魚 , 願者上鉤的姜” (by the way, these lines were taught to me by a classmate at Indiana, C.P. Chou!). Moreover, my “Middlebury connection” was instrumental in landing my first tenure-track position (at Colorado).

As some of you may know, speaking Chinese well was not a trait characteristic of my generation of China scholars. In fact, most of them instead spoke Japanese! There are many reasons for this, but I do not need to go into them here. Suffice it to say that my Chinese language skills made me special among my peers, and this in turn opened doors that otherwise would have been closed. Potential employers saw me as a job candidate who could teach both area classes on China in English and language courses. At the time (early 1980s), this distinguished me from many other job candidates in field, many of whom did their dissertation research in Japan and spoke modern Japanese quite well but spoke little or no Mandarin (Mainland China was still pretty much “closed” at the time). Today, of course, it is absolutely necessary for job candidates in the China to field have both specialized knowledge in a particular research field *and* language skills, especially for positions at smaller colleges where the one, resident “China expert”

on the faculty is expected to teach language classes and area courses on history, literature, culture, film, and so on.

As far as career impact is concerned, when I first got to Mainland China back in the 1980s, there were not a whole lot of foreigners (especially white guys from the United States) around who spoke Chinese. The result, of course, was that I received lots of attention, and on many occasions this attention helped me in many ways. On a personal level, it allowed to make many acquaintances, most of whom spoke limited or no English. My ability to speak some Chinese opened the floodgates of potential friendships. At first, it seemed as though almost everyone I met wanted to be friends. Of course, many of these people wanted to establish a friendship with me because they wanted something. I distinctly remember one woman asking me to marry her daughter and take the young woman to the United States so “she could attend Harvard.” Others thought I would make a good English language partner, or might be in a position to help them get a visa so they could attend college or graduate school in America. But I also met several very warm and genuine people who wanted nothing more than to just be friends (my gregarious personality was certainly a factor here) and do all the things that friends do together. I think someone once said that “true friendship transcends all boundaries,” and I believe this to be true. But for me, at least, it was good language

skills that “broke the ice” and “open the doors” that made these friendships—many of which I still maintain today—possible in the first place.

Of course, language facility also helped me professionally. Those of us who engage in scholarly research are always after elusive primary sources. For scholars of my generation, back in the day this meant gaining access to libraries in China that oftentimes did not welcome foreigners. I’ll just cite one anecdote: during a year spent in China doing research for my doctoral dissertation I once visited the Zhejiang Provincial Library for Ancient Texts (浙江省圖書館古籍部) in Hangzhou, in hopes of looking at some Ming and Qing editions of verse written by a Song dynasty poet named Chen Yuyi 陳與義 (1090-1139; the subject of my dissertation). Of course, when I first arrived at the library, I had all the necessary documents in hand (my passport, a copy of my 學習計畫, several 介紹信, some 外匯眷, and so on). But I needed to get permission from the Director. But each time I went there in hopes of speaking with him, the lady in the gray Mao jacket at the front desk (who never smiled or made eye contact) would recite the same story: “今天不能見 館長, 他出差了.” When I asked when the Director would return, the lady-who-never-smiled would just mutter (again, with no eye contact): “不清楚.” Clearly, she did not want me “trespassing” in her library! Was it because she

feared that a foreigner might glimpse some of the 內部資料 held in the library?

But that doesn't apply to me! I couldn't care less about politically sensitive materials stored in the back room! My only interest is Song dynasty poetry!

Well, as it turns out, at a banquet held at the Louwailou 樓外樓 a few weeks later, by chance I ran into the Director, whose surname just happened to be 何.

Like most 幹部 I had previously encountered, he was stone-faced and distant. I wondered: "How could get through to this guy and thereby gain access to the library?" I resorted to an approach which has always worked well for me as a "diplomatic tool" in a Chinese cultural context (and which I learned from 郭老師):

humor. I said to him: "館長, 您姓何, 我也姓何, 那, 我們是本家的吧." This succeeded in breaking a little ice and generating a brief conversation. While we made small talk, the Director casually asked about my family background. Of course, given the opportunity, I immediately mentioned that Dad had worked with the 飛虎隊 in Sichuan. This really got his attention, and so our brief conversation turned into an extended one over several shots of 白酒. As we were parting at the end of the evening, I mentioned my desire to look at some materials in his library. Not surprisingly, the very next day I had my permission pass (to say the least, the

lady-who-never-smiled was especially displeased about this development; she scowled at me every time I walked by her). Thereafter, each time I visited the library, the Director would go out of his way to introduce me to various people, and he would do so exactly like this: 這位美國來的研究生叫何瞻。他父親是飛虎隊的, 二戰的時候, 殺了不少日本鬼子 (he really said this ever time!). The moral of the story told here is quite simple: with a little humor and some solid language skills, a door (in this case, literally a door!) opened that otherwise would have remained forever closed. And yes, that I would run into and be introduced to the Director while having dinner at Louwailou happened completely by accident. Throughout my entire career language skills and a little humor (or flattery) has taken me places that otherwise would have been strictly off limits. Another favorite ice-breaker of mine that always works is this: when someone would seem to be impressed that I am a 教授 from America, I always counter such thoughts with this announcement: 在美國當教授, 越教越瘦! Works well every time, especially with Chinese academics.

A related observation: Chinese people—and yes, even an elderly, stern *ganbu* 幹部 who direct libraries, almost always appreciate foreigners who have made an effort to study the Chinese language seriously. Of course, if you can only

mutter something like a toneless 你好嗎!, they will shower you with compliments such as: “Wow, your Chinese is terrific!” But this is simply a situation-bound utterance. Chinese listeners go on “auto-pilot” in such situations, and the only proper response is a compliment. My more general point here, I suppose, is that language ability not only provides a portal to library resources, but in fact allows one to gain “enhanced” access to numerous aspects of Chinese culture. And the better you can communicate in the language, the bigger the “door.” I think this is because Chinese people, especially educated Chinese people, are more inclined to drop cultural barriers when they realize that a “溝通” situation exists with a non-Chinese person. And sure, we will always be considered *laowai* 老外 in China, regardless of language skills. But many of the people I have encountered in China—especially scholars in my field who do not speak English—actively seek out and welcome the exchange of ideas when there is a communication link. In other words, language ability means more you are more “welcomed” and “accepted” by Chinese colleagues, friends, and acquaintances (by way of contrast, Japan seems very different in this respect, but I am not sure why).

As a language teacher, I constantly emphasize how students can utilize various language-related strategies to gain better access to these cultural portals. Another anecdote: at UAlbany-SUNY I regularly teach our third-year modern

Chinese class. Believe or not, one part of that curriculum includes study of a few popular Chinese songs (here I am copying a practice learned from one of my third-year teachers at the Middlebury Chinese Summer School, one 姜老師 from Princeton). Students in Albany often ask me: “I want to speak Mandarin as much as possible during my study abroad year in China. How do I make Chinese friends there?” One strategy I recommend is this: “Get out and meet people and strike up a conversation. This could be done in a public park or at an art show. Find out what’s going on and get there.” Another strategy is this: “If you meet someone whose company you seem to enjoy, invite them to lunch or dinner and/or a karaoke club.” Since young Chinese people love karaoke, I prepare my students for study abroad by teaching them popular songs. Last year, for instance, we learned “梅花” and a song called “小蘋果” by group called “筷子兄弟.” Several students, after returning to UAlbany from study abroad in Taiwan and China, reported: “The fact that I was familiar with a popular song and could actually sing it in Chinese” helped me to make many, many new friends.” I bet that many of those friendships will last a lifetime.

Many people have told me over the years that when they observe me engaged in conversation with a Chinese person they see physical changes in my tone of voice and body language. I am not precisely sure about how or why I might

have adopted such practices, but this behavior—my Chinese and American friends both tell me—is unmistakable. I suspect, however, that this practice began through an unconscious attempt to mimic how my teachers (especially 郭老師) spoke and responded physically in various classroom contexts. Regardless of the origin, I emphasize to my students another key language-learning technique that will open even more cultural doors: *mimicking* native speakers, especially in social situations. Of course, correct and proper use of vocabulary (pronunciation and tones), situation-bound utterances, and sentence patterns is critical for effective language communication. But here my point is also mimicking the *physical* “movements” or “mannerisms” that accompany speech. For instance, as you all know, there is an appropriate time to speak with a softer or more humble tone of voice (just one example: when responding to a question by a teacher in a one-on-one situation), there is an appropriate time to bow the head slightly and avoid direct eye contact (when meeting someone older and whose social position is significantly senior to yours), and there is an appropriate time to use two hands when handing an object to someone (for instance, when a student hands in an examination to a teacher), to cite just three examples. In my classes I am able to draw on my own personal experience via stories, anecdotes, and even by means of role playing, to emphasize the critical importance of mimicking how Chinese speak the language

and how they alter or adjust tone of voice, body language, and so on, in different social and cultural contexts.

Now, I am sure that most of you would agree with the following observation: when a graduate student is engaged in conversation with a library director or teacher (especially for the first time), it is essential to look and sound “humble.” Or, in just about any kind of social situation, it is essential that you never cause anyone to “lose face.” These of course are behaviors that are essential components of Chinese culture. American college students, however, have great difficulty understanding these concepts and putting them into practice, and this is because from an early age they are almost always praised for any effort, even when they fail (“It’s not whether you win or lose, Johnny, it’s how you play the game”). Again, drawing on my own experience, I encourage students to mimic how native speakers respond to such situations. This can be done in class through role playing and short skits or watching scenes from particular movies/television programs (soap operas can be especially useful in this respect). The key is to mimic, mimic, and then mimic some more! Of course, some students copy better than others, but this is to be expected. The key here is that they must become aware of when and how to respond. When someone is praised, the proper response—as you all know—is to be humble and not say “Thank you!” I always go out of my way during class to bring up such situations. For instance, I might praise a student for

his/her “perfect tones,” “wonderful pronunciation,” or “complete fluency in the language” (none of which is ever true). At first, they consistently reply to my compliments by saying: “謝謝!” But after a while, as a result of many corrections and exhortations from me, the “Thanks you!” responses disappear and instead I will hear “哪裡哪裡” or “不敢當.” Eventually, students will respond with the appropriate “situation-bound” verbal *and* physical response. And yes, in the final analysis, I am simply passing on cultural knowledge I have gained by observing my teachers and friends, and copying how I have observed them in various social and cultural situations.

After reading an earlier version of this paper, in his comments and reactions Professor Link asked me to offer some remarks on the following: have my skills in speaking modern Chinese helped to make me a better scholar of traditional literature? Although I had never before even thought about this question, the answer is an absolute, unequivocal “Yes!” I can cite many examples to support my affirmation, but I’ll cite just one: while doing research on my Ph.D. dissertation in Taiwan, I was having some difficulty understanding several of Chen Yuyi’s poems. Well, it just so happened that there was an elderly scholar at National Taiwan University at the time--Professor Zheng Qian 鄭騫--who had just published a critical edition of Chen’s poetry. Through some *guanxi* that I had

established at Taida, I was able to meet Professor Zheng and he later agreed to help me read through Chen Yuyi's poetry. All of our conversations were conducted in modern Chinese because Zheng Laoshi did not speak any English. There is no doubt whatsoever that Chinese language skills in this case saved the day, saved my dissertation, and saved me! Over the course of my career I have met and interacted with numerous scholars and specialists in my field, all of whom offered to help me gaining better understanding of the primary sources upon which my research has been based. Better understanding leads to greater insight, which in turn always yields better scholarship. None of this benefit would have come forth, however, without modern Chinese language skills on my end, and this is mainly because most scholars in Taiwan and Mainland China who work in my field are older and speak no English.

Coda: For me, at least, ultimately what has mattered most in my career as a sinologist is not the books I have written and the articles I have published. Rather, it has been the teachers, friends, and students I have met along the way. Among my mentors, Mr. Taft, Professor Wu, Guo Laoshi, and Luo Laoshi, are most prominent. Among my good friends (老戰友), I'll just mention Rick Hutchison (aka 何興漢), Chou Chih-p'ing, and Xu Yongming, though there are many, many

others. Among my most gifted language students I will only mention Max Hirsch (a journalist based in Taiwan), Liz Lynch (Harvard Law School graduate and now a specialist in Chinese law based in New York City), and Jeremy Murray (now an Assistant Professor of Chinese History at Cal State-San Bernardino). Recently I took a look at Jeremy Murray's "grades" on the "Rate My Professor" website.

Here are two, representative selections from the student comments I found there:

(1) "Very passionate, loves his topic, is funny and entertaining, and answers questions thoroughly. He is completely for the students" ; (2) "Dr. Murray is the definition of a passionate professor. The love he has for Chinese history and his students is clear within the first five minutes of the first lecture." Now, if you were to go to that same website and look at the student comments about *my* classes, there you would find similar observations related to love of teaching, caring about students, relaxed atmosphere in class, and even praise for the "extra credit" options I often give to students (I know such comments are there because I checked!).

Surely, there are parallels at work here, though I cannot say for sure if Jeremy is consciously mimicking my teaching style and methods, which of course I copied from Guo Laoshi. But I would like to think so

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21 August 2016
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