

## Chinese Language in My Career

(draft)

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What has learning Chinese (or learning some of it, since no one learns it all) meant for my professional work? My special fields have been Chinese language, literature, and popular culture, and I have also spent considerable time doing human rights work.

I won't dwell on the tautology that Chinese language is important for the study of Chinese language, but for the fields of literature, popular culture, and human rights will offer two broad observations. The first is that speaking Chinese helps one to be accepted among Chinese people, who tend to relax and open up more readily in their own language than in someone else's. This rule no doubt holds in many cultures, but, I think, may be stronger in China's case than others. The second observation is that learning Chinese made it easier for me to appreciate some of the ways in which people think differently in Chinese and in English, which is my native language. This point can be exaggerated and abused, and I will touch on that problem later. But I begin with the first observation, which is the more obvious of the two.

### *Getting Accepted*

How much does it help, in communicating across cultures, to go beyond mere statement of points and to be able, through sound and manner, to move at least part way inside the second culture? Perhaps the commander of an aircraft carrier, in addressing the patrol boat of an opposing navy, can settle for "message only" communication. But isn't it obvious that scholars, journalists, business people, diplomats, and many others can do better if their speech and behavior seem natural to the people they are dealing with? I imagine this is true across a wide spectrum of activities, extending even to the nefarious. Don't traffickers and con artists do better, on average, if their speech seems natural? What about acupuncturists? Ping-pong

coaches? People who just want to make friends and have fun? Natural language use would seem an equal-opportunity purveyor of advantage.

Of the four “basic skills” in language learning—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—speaking is at the front line in earning acceptance for a person only because it is the easiest to observe. The more you sound Chinese, the more you seem Chinese, other things being equal. It also helps, of course, to have a Chinese-looking face; a white or black face can set you back a bit, at least temporarily, no matter how Chinese you might sound. This point struck me with special clarity one day in 1979 when, on a street in Guangzhou, I asked a passerby for directions to *Zhongshan beilu* 中山北路. I asked in my best, slow but precise, Harvard-trained Mandarin. In those days there weren’t many foreigners in Guangzhou, and the passerby, appearing startled and a bit panicky, took a moment to scrutinize my face. Then he said in Cantonese *ngaw mm sik Yeng-man!* (“I don’t know English!”) and moved on. He may not have known much Mandarin—I don’t know. In any case the evidence of his eyes outweighed the evidence of his ears.

When Chinese people do figure out that a foreigner’s face is trying to produce Chinese sounds, their response is very often warm and generous. Even if you in fact sound horrible, people are flattered that you care enough to try. Statements like “Your Chinese is great!” are sincere expressions of sentiment even if useless as measures of how good your Chinese actually is. In the summer of 1994, when I served as field director of the *Princeton-in-Beijing* language program, I occasionally felt sorry for our Chinese-American students. Some of them were “zero beginners” —no different, in that regard, from their white and black and Latino classmates—and just as likely as they to be making beginner-level mistakes. Out on the streets in Beijing, however, they were treated differently. No “your Chinese is great” for them! Instead they sometimes heard things like, “Look at you! Chinese and you can’t speak Chinese! Aren’t you embarrassed?”

But if looks can be a barrier, it is definitely true that sounds can help to bring barriers down. I may be wrong, but I have the impression that my Chinese friends—at least the ones I have known for some time—tend to forget that I am not Chinese. Or, if that statement goes too far, at least they begin to think that my being human is more important than whatever else I

might be. This acceptance appears most clearly during lively or heated discussions when the issues at hand take center stage; at such times I get treated pretty much like everybody else. The borderline never disappears 100%, but to the extent that it does go away, I think that my sounding Chinese in speech is an important reason why.

In any case, I am sufficiently convinced of the payoffs of sounding Chinese that, every time I have taught elementary Chinese, I have insisted on correct pronunciation of Chinese tones. Very seldom have I met a student who cannot master tones. I do not mean that they all *do* master them, only that they all can. Correct habits come more easily to some than to others; but if a teacher is insistent and patient, it works even when it's difficult.

What exactly are the costs of speaking in wrong tones? There are many jokes about what can happen when foreigners make tone mistakes. Tones are phonemes in the sense that they change the identity of a syllable just as vowels do in pairs like *bed* and *bad*, or as consonants do in words like *bed* and *bet*. It is therefore easy to see why tone-chaos is rich turf for jokes. First-tone *mā* is 'mom' and third-tone *mǎ* is 'horse'. A student who confuses the two might end up saying that her mother placed third in a horserace or that he learned his table manners from a horse.

But these are only jokes. In the real world such misunderstandings are extremely rare. Chinese people are smart enough to figure out from context whether you are speaking of your mother or your horse. The actual costs of tone mistakes must be measured in the distance they generate between speaker and listener. The poorer one's pronunciation, the greater the distance. One might object to this principle by pointing out that Chinese people themselves, in different parts of China, use tones differently and yet are still regarded as Chinese. True enough; but Chinese grow familiar with these divergences among compatriots and regard them as natural, even if not standard, whereas a foreigners ways of butchering tones seem outlandish. Foreigners, moreover, sometimes go all the way into pristine tonelessness, and this, when it happens, can make them seem as far away as the other side of the moon—even while the "content" of what they say continues to be decipherable.

To dramatize this point for my students, I take a few minutes during the first hour of elementary courses to do a little experiment. How bad does tone-free Chinese sound? About as

bad, I tell them, as vowel-neutral English. To demonstrate the point, I choose a student at random to give me any short sentence in English—"the cat is on the mat," or something like that. Then I ask another student to name a vowel sound—"long *a*," "short *o*," or whatever. Then I challenge all the students to pronounce the given sentence using *only* the given vowel—i.e., the same sound for every vowel-occurrence in the sentence. (You, the reader of this essay, can do this experiment for yourself right now, if you like.) My exchanges with the students then run something like this:

"How does the sentence sound?," I ask.

"Pretty weird," they say.

"Is it understandable?"

"Yes, probably is, just barely..."

"So the meaning comes across?"

"Yes."

"But would you want to do business with this person?"

"Uh..."

"Form a partnership?"

"No, thanks."

"Reveal a political opinion?"

"...mmm..."

"Go on a date?"

"Forget it!"

In whatever activity, sounding right helps. This is not, I believe, because Chinese people consciously take offense at tone mistakes, as they might if you appeared to disrespect other aspects of their culture. The communion that good tones provide is less conscious than that; it

establishes an undergirding that says something like, “we’re both human beings.” Good tones do not mean that one automatically gets inside Chinese life, and bad tones do not mean that one is forever barred. But it beyond doubt that good pronunciation helps.

The principle can be illustrated by negative example. In contexts where Chinese people are concerned that doors remain shut, good pronunciation from a foreigner can make them nervous. Government officials, for example, need to adhere to the principle that *neiwai youbie* 内外有别 ‘the inside and the outside are separate’, and they can seem almost electrically averse to the idea that foreigners might penetrate their world. They feel more comfortable dealing with foreigners who either speak no Chinese or, if they do know some, speak it badly enough that the line between “you” and “us” remains unmistakable. Once, at a luncheon for a visiting Chinese delegation, where Americans and Chinese were speaking through interpreters, I saw an American use natural-sounding Chinese to ask a question directly of a Chinese official. The official, not quite knowing what to do, turned to his interpreter and waited for a near-verbatim repetition of the question from the interpreter. She, after all, was the person who was supposed to be speaking Chinese to him. The re-routing of the message through her was not done to improve clarity, I think; it was more nearly a cultural reflex, done to maintain the border between “the two sides.”

I may be an peculiar case, but for me tones have stuck so inextricably that I literally cannot think in Chinese without them. I cannot learn a new word, or a person’s name, without the tones. I know of great Sinologists whose erudition in Chinese texts far exceeds my own and who have reached the summits of their learning tonelessly; I cannot, though, sense intuitively how they do it. For me *niao* is simply blank until it is either *niǎo* ‘bird’ or *niào* ‘urine’, and I can’t even imagine what it would be like to think one of the two meanings without thinking the tone. At my age I have begun to have more trouble than before in remembering names, and I have also noted the odd fact of being able, sometimes, to recall only the tone of the missing syllable in a name, without the vowels or consonants.

These reflections on how language habits can sink in bring us to the “second observation” that I referred to at the beginning. Has the Chinese language given me different ways to see the world? How much and in what ways?

### *Thinking Differently?*

The famous hypothesis of Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir—which says, roughly, that the way you think depends upon the language you use—has been controversial ever since the two linguists advanced it in 1939. Critics have objected that causality might run in the opposite direction—surely, to some extent, thought also shapes language, doesn't it? Others have cautioned that, whichever way causality runs, we are dealing only in tendencies, not in strict determinacies. Few, though, have denied that Whorf and Sapir had a point.

My own experience of living most of my life in two languages, for both professional and personal use, has been that Whorf and Sapir very much had a point. Things feel different to me in Chinese and in English. I might pepper my Chinese sentences with English words, or pepper my English with Chinese words, but the grammar of any sentence—the way it is conceived—is never hybrid. It is one or the other. Moreover this separateness of conception somehow extends beyond sentence-level grammar; it reaches at least to the paragraph level. I have often felt a bit sour when someone asks me to translate one of my own essays. (I try to hide the sourness, but I do feel it.) Translate? No. It's never as simple as that. To fill your request, I want to say, I am going to have to sit down, re-attach to my inspirations, and conceive the paragraphs anew in the other language. I have this feeling regardless of whether I am going from English to Chinese or from Chinese to English.

I should caution here that I am not talking about exoticism. For decades, even centuries, people in both China and the West have tended to look across at the other side and imagine something very different, sometimes even a mystical antipode. This tendency reveals little, I'm afraid, except that actual understanding has been shallow. In fact, ordinary life is ordinary on both sides—and not only ordinary but considerably more similar in its human fundamentals than the mystical views suggest. At least that's my opinion.

Let's take a language example to illustrate. “A table” is 一张桌子. To understand the conceptual structure of the Chinese, one must accept that 桌子 means neither *table* nor *tables* but an abstraction, more like “tableness.” That's why we need 张 to individuate. To say “a table”

we say “one flat-item-of tableness.” Two people 两个人 are “two individuations of humanity,” and so on. It is easy to see how this structural difference, taken superficially, can lead to exoticism. *In China tables are flat items of tableness! How quaint! Carpenters think in Platonic Forms!* Meanwhile, an unquaint 桌子 just stands there.

So my point is not that either language is exotic but only that word-for-word switching between the two doesn't work. Each has its ways of conceiving things, and to say something natural-sounding in either you have to let it have its autonomy. The difference between 一张桌子 and “a table” is but a tiny example. And nouns are only one of the problems. Verbs, adjectives, and “sentences” are also conceived differently. Things like rhythms and parallelisms differ, too.

In teaching Chinese I have always tried to get students as soon as possible to think in Chinese rather than to think in English and then translate. This approach requires conscious effort from the teacher. A Chinese toddler needs no special training in order to accept 桌子 in the sense of “tableness”; but a young adult speaker of English, inured in the habit that concrete nouns have to be either singular or plural, needs to “get it” that Chinese conceives concrete nouns differently. I remember once explaining to a beginning class that the sentence 书在桌子上 does not tell you whether it is “the book” or “the books” that is (or are) on the table (or tables). Then I tried to make the point that that is all right. I said something like, “you don't have to know every single detail in order to get along in the world. The Chinese language does have ways to make clear how many books you are talking about if that's what you want to do. But if the number of books doesn't matter, or if it is already obvious, then it's okay to leave that detail out of the sentence.” After class, a student came up to me. He was a philosophy major and extremely bright. “But *in fact*,” he said, “I mean *in the real world*, it can't be ‘bookness’ that is on the table. It *has to be* one or another number of concrete books.” He was afraid that Chinese was taking leave of the real world. Eventually he did “get it,” though, and became very good at thinking in Chinese.

I imagine that the ability to think in both Chinese and English and not to let the thought-modes of one inhibit or confuse thought in the other might be an advantage in many fields of study and work related to China, but I think it's especially important in my fields of literature,

popular culture, and human rights advocacy. These are fields that depend importantly on empathy, on trying to “get inside” someone else’s mind and feelings. When the person whose mind one is trying to appreciate is thinking, speaking, and writing in Chinese, to confine one’s own thinking to English seems to add an unnecessary layer of difficulty. It is, as the Chinese cliché puts it, like “scratching the itch from outside the boot” 隔靴搔痒. Scholars in the Western Sinological tradition who study Chinese texts using English, French, or German sometimes go so far as to say that one doesn’t *really* understand a Tang poem until one translates it into a Western language. I don’t get that. I have great respect for the meticulous work in classical Western Sinology, but if artistic appreciation is the point, to stay inside a Western language still strikes me as scratching an itch from outside a boot. I agree with Fritz Mote, who once observed that the measure of how well you understand a Tang poem is not how well you can translate it but how dissatisfied you are with even the best of translations.

The difference between reading originals and reading translations struck me with unusual clarity one year when I was teaching at UCLA and, by chance, was simultaneously offering two versions of the same course in modern Chinese literature. One class of students read English translations and met to discuss them in English at 10:00 a.m.; the other class—mostly of native Chinese speakers from China or Taiwan—read the same stories in the originals and met to discuss them in Chinese at 1:00 p.m. I had anticipated that discussion in the two classes would differ, but I had not guessed how great the differences would be. We read, for example, Lu Xun’s famous story 孔乙己, which opens with 鲁镇的酒店的格局，是和别处不同的。 This is a graceful line that slips the reader of Chinese gently into a scene that, a few pages later, turns profoundly disturbing. One reason why the line is graceful is that it subtly evokes the “2-2-3 plus 2-2-3” syllabic rhythm that has deep roots in Chinese poetry and song. Can the beauty of the line survive translation? Gladys and Xianyi Yang write: “The layout of Luzhen’s taverns is unique.”<sup>1</sup> That’s not bad, but we can see right away that the subtle rhythm is gone. Can a teacher (like me, in my 10:00 a.m. class) dig in and explain the rhythm question to students? Sure, but this turns the reading experience from lyrical appreciation into cognitive study. (Literary grace, like a frog, dies when dissected.) Should the teacher explain what a 酒店 is? The Yangs say *tavern*, and I would support their choice even though the cultural connotations are

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<sup>1</sup>*Selected Stories of Lu Xun*, p. TK

not quite right. Would *wineshop* or *bar* be better? Yes for some reasons, no for others. How much class time should be used to explain cultural differences? Some of the cultural background is vital to appreciation of the story: Kong Yiji is a failed scholar in China's Qing-era civil service examinations, wears a long gown to try to maintain the scholar's image, and so on. Can we explain all this? Will it do not to explain it? Class time is limited, and whatever is spent on explanations cannot be spent on the heart of the story. No matter what I did, it seemed futile to expect the 10:00 class and the 1:00 class to resemble each other very well.

One of my career avocations has been the study of *xiangsheng*, China's popular oral-performance art, rapid-fire and witty, whose closest Western counterpart is stand-up comedy. *Xiangsheng* and Tang poetry could hardly be more different, but one point they share is their rock-solid untranslatability. Without Chinese language it would have been quite impossible for me to get mired in *xiangsheng*.

I feel that my human rights work also depends importantly on Chinese language. To some extent this connection is a peculiarity, however. Many people who are very good at advocacy of human rights in China speak little or no Chinese. There are also plenty of people who know quite a bit of Chinese but do not get involved with human rights or who even defend the Chinese government when it suppresses human rights. For me, the reason why Chinese language is important in human rights work is that, when I think about rights issues, I try to set aside what governments say and focus on the concerns that ordinary people have in daily life: food, housing, schooling, health, personal dignity, elemental fairness, the power to control one's own life, and so on. When a journalist or someone else asks me questions about anti-corruption campaigns, air pollution, family planning policies, underground churches, conflicts with Japan, and other issues that get into the news, what I try to do is to imagine and to empathize with an ordinary person's point of view. This is risky, of course; how can one really know what people far away are feeling? But *not* to do this, especially if it means filling the knowledge void with government-sponsored generalizations, seems to me even more hazardous. So I go ahead and try to empathize, and that empathy-leap, for me, depends heavily on language. It depends specifically on my impressions of the daily-life values and concerns of ordinary Chinese people, which are things that feel to me as if they lie in a cultural substratum that is not subject to abrupt change as news of the day comes and goes. But where do those impressions come from? When

I reflect on the matter, it seems they come mainly from Chinese fiction that I have read and Chinese-language conversations that I have had. True, I also read and talk a lot in English about China. But—and I’m not sure I can explain this—my sense of popular Chinese ideas and attitudes comes overwhelming through Chinese, not English. For just one example: when Chinese people speak in Chinese about elite-level politics in China, the terms and the texture of their conversations are very different from the ways in which Americans speak in English on the same topic.

### *Different World Views, Perhaps?*

In the early 1990s I became intrigued for a time with what cognitive scientists call “conceptual metaphor.” An example in English is “consciousness is *up* and unconsciousness *down*.” We *wake up* but *fall* asleep, *sink* into a coma, and so on, and we even say of computer systems, those imitators of human consciousness, that they are “up” or “down” depending on whether they seem to be awake. One reason for my interest in conceptual metaphor was that I noticed that they are sometimes different in Chinese, where we *yunguoqu* 晕过去 ‘faint across away’, and then, when we regain consciousness, *xingguolai* 醒过来 ‘wake across to here’. No *up* or *down*. In the Chinese metaphor one crosses an imaginary line that separates one side from another on a single plane. I wondered whether, if I studied the conceptual metaphors of Chinese and English carefully, I might be able to piece together two different coherent world views.

Years later I published my results in a 120-page section of my book *An Anatomy of Chinese* (Harvard, 2013). By then, various explorations through the byways of the topic, while affording much pleasure, had also brought me to the conclusion that my hope of finding coherent alternate world views was futile. First, I discovered that neither Chinese nor English uses a system of conceptual metaphor that is internally consistent. For example, both English and Chinese (and virtually all human languages) use “space-for-time” metaphors: something can take a *long* time, we *look back* at last week, and so on. But the uses are inconsistent within the languages. In English we can say “Our ancestors came *before* us, so cannot help us with the problems that lie *before* us.” The first *before* means “in the past” and the second means “in the future.” Similarly in Chinese, we say *yiqian* 以前 to mean “in the past” but *xiang qian kan* 向前

看 to mean “look to the future.” *Qian* can point either direction. Such discoveries complicated my search for coherent metaphor patterns even within a single language and left my hope of discovering two whole world views in parallel even more far-fetched.

At the same time, a careful examination of the problems of *before* and *qian* (pioneered by a scholar named Ning Yu—you can read about it in *Anatomy*) revealed an amazing fact: the paradoxes show an uncanny resemblance in the two languages.<sup>2</sup> The similarities are deeply embedded in both and cannot possibly be explained as borrowing. They seemed to me to confirm the claims of people like Immanuel Kant and Noam Chomsky when they hold that certain perceptual and linguistic structures are hard-wired in the human brain. My overall feeling, at the end of the study, was that human languages share much more in common than I had originally supposed. Sometimes they share even the ways in which they are internally inconsistent. It was an oddly comforting thought. It seemed in tune with my intuitions about the universality of human nature and human rights.

Yet it remained fun to search for differences, and I kept going. Examples of untranslatable sentences seemed a good place to start. One can argue, of course, that no two sentences in Chinese and English are ever *exactly* equivalent. Even *zhuozi* is “tableness,” not “a table,” as we have noted above. But I mean something even more frustrating than that. I mean puzzles like *ta shi dijige jin jiaoshi de?* 他是第几个进教室的? How can we say that sentence in English? Can we say “He was the what-numberedth to enter the classroom?”? *Numberedth* isn’t a word. We could expand it to “What place was he in as he entered the classroom?” But that’s ambiguous. It might be answered as, “He was in McCosh Hall in Princeton, N.J.” How about, “What number was he in entering the classroom?” But here “number” is ambiguous. Of course we could spell the whole thing out as, “If several people were entering the classroom and one was first, another second, and so on, what number was he?” Now the meaning is clear, but it uses thirty syllables, compared to nine in the original, and the conceptual structure is different. It is easy, too, to think of puzzles that go in the other direction, from English to Chinese. How do

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<sup>2</sup>Ning Yu, *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor: A Perspective from Chinese* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1998), pp. 102-107.

you say in Chinese “there are fish as good in the sea as any that ever came from it”—without generating either considerable confusion or considerable expansion?

In the end, though, these matters are but puzzles, and probably not significant in life except at the level where one enjoys puzzles. Are there examples where the different structures of Chinese and English language lead to something more profound? I believe so, and I try to address one of them near the end of the “metaphor” chapter in my *Anatomy* book. I speculate there on whether the preference in English and other Indo-European languages for conceiving experience in nouns might create philosophical problems that, if one used verb-rich Chinese instead, might seem smaller problems, or indeed not problems at all.

Problems in Western philosophy have often taken the form of “What is X?,” where X is grammatically a noun that therefore refers, implicitly, to an abstract thing. What is Form? Matter? The Good? Mind? Beauty? Justice? Existence? And so on. But such questions don’t fit easily into Chinese, where conceiving nouns doesn’t happen so easily and verbs are used more. For example, an English phrase like “the nature of existence” suggests an abstract, even mystical, idea, but grammatically it still feels natural and invites a mind to explore it. If we translate word-for-word into Chinese, though, we get *cunzai de xingzhi* 存在的性质, an awkward and opaque phrase that virtually broadcasts its Western-language origins. China’s great pre-Qin philosophers also thought about existence and non-existence, but they used *you* 有 and *wu* 无 to do it. *You* and *wu* are verbs.

I began to wonder: How strong is the habit in Indo-European languages of thinking in nouns, and might this habit matter in Western philosophy? The strength of the nominalizing habit hit me with special force one day in January, 1979, in Guangzhou, where I was visiting with a UCLA delegation whose goal was to set up academic exchanges with Zhongshan University. At a formal meeting, I found myself interpreting for a UCLA vice chancellor who spoke of “the beginning of the development of the process of construction of bi-lateral relations.” How should I translate? Should I say, literally, *liang bian de guanxi de jianshe de guocheng de fazhan de kaishi* 两边的关系的建设的的过程的发展的开始? Would Chinese people in the audience not think that the American vice chancellor had lost his grip? Why was it, I wondered later, that he could sound okay (if a bit stuffy) in English and yet almost moronic in

Chinese? The answer seemed to have something to do with his taking all those verby things—*begin, develop, proceed, construct, relate*—and making them into nouns. This works fine in English, not in Chinese.

I decided to do an objective experiment. I opened Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* at random and counted the number of nouns and verbs on one page. Then I did the same for Cao Xueqin's *Hongloumeng* 红楼梦. The ratio of nouns to verbs on the Dickens page was 2.5 to 1.0. On the Cao page it was 0.8 to 1.0. The results were not super-precise, because for the Chinese I sometimes had to be a bit arbitrary in deciding what part of speech a word was. Still, the overall picture was pretty clear.

The question, now, was whether the tendency of Western philosophers to pose questions of the form "what is [noun]?" might be little more than a thought-habit induced by the grammatical penchants of their native languages. Would their classic philosophical problems look different if approached in Chinese?

I decided to test the matter using the famous "mind-body problem"—the mystery of how the physical body and the non-physical mind can be related, as they obviously are. I read a book on the problem called *The Mysterious Flame* (Basic Books, 1999) by Colin McGinn, a philosopher whom I greatly admire. McGinn gives several examples of how physical things occupy space while mental things do not. Here is one of his examples:

Consider the visual experience of seeing a red sphere two feet away with a six-inch diameter. The object of this experience is of course a spatial object with spatial properties, but the experience itself does not have these properties: it is not two feet away from you and six inches in diameter. ...When we reflect on the experience itself, we can see that it lacks spatial properties altogether.<sup>3</sup>

In *Anatomy*, I follow McGinn's lines with these of my own:

The key phrase here is "the experience itself." Is there such a thing? The noun "experience" exists, but that is not the question. Does *the experience* exist? We might

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<sup>3</sup>*The Mysterious Flame*, p. 109

feel intuitively that it does. But does this intuition arise, in part, from the grammatical habit of using nouns like "experience" and assuming that they refer to things? Is there a way we can test whether our intuitions indeed are being shaped by nouns?

The English word "experience" is perhaps not the best example for doing such a test, simply because it has the same form as both noun ("experience") and verb ("experience"). "Feeling" might work better, because the noun ("feeling") and the verb ("feel") have different forms. In most cases, two statements of the forms "I feel X" and "I have a feeling of X" will not differ much, if at all, in meaning. But now consider this: If I say "I feel X," you cannot grammatically ask me in English "Does your feel have spatial properties?". You *could* ask, "Do you feel with (or in) length and color?", but this question, although grammatical, does not "make sense." No matter how you put them, questions about the spatiality of X are hard to phrase if you use the word "feel" instead of the word "feeling." But if, on the other hand, I say "I have a feeling of X," then the same question—"Does your feeling have spatial properties?"—now does make sense. It not only makes grammatical sense, but makes enough philosophical sense to get into the writing of an excellent philosopher like Colin McGinn. So we can see here that from a starting point where there is no real difference in daily-life usage (i.e., between "I feel X" and "I have a feeling of X"), the choice of which to use can lead to (or perhaps generate?) a great philosophical puzzle if one goes one direction and lead to no puzzlement if one goes the other.<sup>4</sup>

McGinn goes on to point out that numbers, like the experience of red spots, do not occupy space. "We cannot sensibly ask how much space the number 2 takes up relative to the number 37," he writes. "It is hardly true that the bigger the number the more space it occupies."<sup>5</sup> Then he writes:

To attribute spatial properties to numbers is an instance of what philosophers call a category-mistake, trying to talk about something as if it belonged to a category it does not

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<sup>4</sup>*Anatomy of Chinese*, p. 230

<sup>5</sup>*The Mysterious Flame*, p. 110.

belong to. Only concrete things have spatial properties, not abstract things like numbers or mental things like experiences of red.<sup>6</sup>

To this I write, in *Anatomy*:

In my imagination a pre-Qin Chinese philosopher might well accept this point, but then ask McGinn: Why do you experience life as "abstract things"? Is that not also a category-mistake? If I see a red spot, do I not simply see a red spot? The red spot, yes, is a thing, but "I see" is not a thing, either concrete or abstract. I see is I see. If you change it into "my sight" or "my experience of seeing," you are performing a grammatical act, but that grammatical act has no power to change the way the world is.<sup>7</sup>

On several occasions I have presented this argument to philosopher friends. They have all been kind, but answer, one way or another, that "you have not solved the mind-body problem." Fair enough. I don't believe I have solved it, either. But I do think my argument helps to explain why the mind-body problem has been so prominent for Western philosophers, especially since Descartes, whereas Chinese philosophers, both before and after the arrival of Buddhism, although they certainly talk about mind, do not get caught up in the problem. And I think one can legitimately ask: are Western philosophers better off because the grammar of their language helps them to conceive the problem in clearer terms, or are Chinese philosophers better off because the grammar of their language leads them to feel that it is not really a problem? In any case I disagree with George Lakoff, the famous theorist of conceptual metaphor, who has argued that "ontological metaphors" (his term for what I have here been calling "nominalization") "are necessary for even attempting to deal rationally with our experiences."<sup>8</sup> Chinese people, both

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<sup>6</sup>ibid.

<sup>7</sup>*Anatomy*, p. 231

<sup>8</sup>*Metaphors We Live By*, with Mark Johnson (Chicago, 1980,) p. 26

philosophers and ordinary people, use far fewer ontological metaphors than English speakers do and yet have, on average, neither more or less trouble “dealing rationally with experience.”

### *Gardening*

In addition to studying the Chinese language, as I have done in *Anatomy* and elsewhere, I have also spent much of my life teaching Chinese. This activity has been extremely important to me, not only in pursuing a career but in my general enjoyment of life. It deserves a few paragraphs.

I have taught courses in elementary Chinese nearly thirty times, mostly at Princeton but also at Harvard, Middlebury, and the University of California. Because enrolments in beginning language courses tend to be larger than in other courses in China studies, my language students have, over the years, numbered far more than my literature students. There have been many hundreds. Some have become very distinguished, too—as university presidents, U.S. ambassadors, a president of the ACLS, prize-winning journalists, and spectacularly wealthy business people, for example. Their successes in these various fields have had nothing to do with me; my part is only the good luck of having got them started in Chinese, and then watching what happens. The Chinese phrase *qing chuyu lan* 青出于蓝 ‘green emerges from blue (a later generation surpasses its predecessor)’ comes often to mind.

In one sense, the satisfactions of language teaching differ radically from what comes from teaching literature. In one case the results are visible and measurable, in the other they are largely not. When I teach literature, I might get excited about a short story—its beauty, its moral depth, its intellectual puzzles, or whatever—and when this happens I can sense that at least some of the students also get excited. But, in the end, after a class hour or even after a whole course, do I *really* know what they have taken away? No. How could I know? I can give an exam, but exam answers very seldom reveal the really important things that literature offers a person. A few years ago, a student whom I had taught at Princeton in the 1970s came up to me after a lecture and said, “Professor Link, you said something back then that changed my whole life. Thank you.” I asked her what it was, and she said something that I had no recollection of ever saying, or, to be honest, ever thinking. But there it was. I was reminded of Marion Levy, who

was chair of East Asian Studies at Princeton when I first arrived there in 1973. Someone asked Marion what he taught and he said, “I don’t know. I know what I *want* to teach, and I know what the catalogue *says* I teach, but I don’t know what I teach.”

Language teaching, on the other hand, is largely free from this unknowability. It resembles gardening: one prepares the ground (i.e., does foundation work in pronunciation of tones, retroflexes, and other tricky sounds), then sows some seeds (vocabulary and some simple grammar), then adds water, fertilizer, and sunlight (class exercises, homework, a teacher with a sense of humor), pulls some weeds (out with those mistakes!)—and finally, with time, something takes root and grows. It grows on its own—rather like green emerging from blue. All the teacher needs to do is to continue supplying nutrients and to continue with pruning. After the nine months or so of a beginning course, a teacher can stand back and enumerate his or her fruits. She can point to a student (figuratively, of course) and say, “Look what I did! Last year that student knew no Chinese at all, and now he does—and he’s pretty good! See? I made a difference.” The differences are visible. They are much easier to measure than what a teacher of literature achieves.

Gardening pleasures are available to teachers of any language, of course. But for the person who teaches Chinese to English-speaking Americans, I think there are two bonuses. One is the satisfaction of stretching young minds further than European languages do. The jump from “here is the table” to “voici la table” seems bland, I’m afraid, in comparison to a jump to 桌子在这儿。Second, the teacher of Chinese can enjoy the heroic pose of standing against a huge, and in some ways irrational, imbalance in recent human history. This second point needs some elaboration.

In the nineteenth century, after British gunboats arrived on the China coast and began winning one-sided wars, many Chinese concluded that they, too, would need modern arms and other modern devices, and therefore the modern technology necessary to build them, and therefore the “Western learning” that undergirds the technology, and therefore Western languages like English. This summary of recent Chinese history is far too brief, of course, but should be sufficient to make my point that English was pursued not because of any assumption that it was inherently superior to Chinese but because it was seen as indispensable for other

reasons. Fast forward a century or so and millions of Chinese have learned English, some of them extraordinarily well, while Americans who know Chinese were but a tiny few. When I took beginning Chinese at Harvard in fall, 1963, there were only twelve students in my class.

With the economic rise of China in the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese language enrolments rose into the hundreds at places like Harvard. Today there are over 60,000 American college students taking Chinese courses and about 50,000 more studying at the high-school level. But that progress is still not much of a corrective to the huge historical imbalance that remains. Today about 50 million Chinese high-school students study English.<sup>9</sup> That number is about 1,000 times the number of American high-school students studying Chinese (to say nothing of three times larger than the number of U.S. high-schoolers studying *English*). One might object that the situation is not really so imbalanced because the English instruction in China is often very low in quality. That observation is correct but as an objection to the pattern is weak, because Chinese instruction in U.S. high schools, with few exceptions, is also weak. Teachers in the better university programs in the U.S. complain that students who have begun their Chinese in high school often need to start over in college, and restarting is sometimes even more difficult than starting from zero because students arrive with entrenched bad habits, especially in pronunciation.

Meanwhile the overall dominance of English lingers on and is taken for granted even in Sinological circles. During a sabbatical year at the Academia Sinica in Taipei in 2013-14, I enjoyed going to talks in several of the Academy's research institutes, including, one day, a seminar on David Hume in the Europe and America Research Institute. The speaker was a British philosopher from Oxford, and he spoke in carefully crafted and precise English. The questions from the Chinese listeners were also in English, and were also spoken with clarity and precision. I was impressed. This is as it should be, I thought. A British scholar is talking about a British thinker, and everybody uses English. Of course. But then I wondered: how far are we from an "of course" when things are the other way around? If a Chinese scholar offers a talk on Wang Yangming, where in the Western academic world—at what university, or on what panel of the Association for Asian Studies, for example—would the presentation be in Chinese, and the

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<sup>9</sup>Qu, Bo, "Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education," Routledge [ISSN 1358-684X](https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2007.1430000) (December 2007)

question-and-answer afterwards also be in Chinese? If such a thing were to happen, the response to it would likely be of two kinds.

One opinion would be, “How can you do this? We don’t do this here. We speak English here.” An underlying thought, not expressed but operative, would be, “real intellectual work proceeds in English.” Every China scholar has seen, I am sure, examples of Chinese native speakers struggling to present their research in English in order to fit the norms of how “serious” intellectual work is done. This effort reaches even to the extent of deliberately mispronouncing Chinese names in the ways in which native speakers of English normally mispronounce them.

Another kind of response would be to praise the use of Chinese: what a bold innovation, what an exceptional display of brilliance and show of respect for Chinese culture! But the volume of the applause, I’m afraid, would only underscore how unusual the pattern is and will continue to be.