

DRAFT

## Reasons You've Never Thought of: Why Studying Chinese Made a Difference

By Melinda Liu

1 Even now, after decades of Chinese language lessons, I often struggle. Perhaps each of us has been there, trapped in limbo while stammering and searching for the right word. The right word order. The right tone. Just the right flourish. The first thing I want say about learning to speak Chinese is that I never feel like I've learned it well enough. All I can say is I've studied it for a long time – and feel I need to keep on studying.

2 Of course, studying Chinese has made a difference in my media career --a *huge* difference, an infinite universe of differences. It's impacted big, cosmic issues – “belongingness”, identity, seeing the world through another's eyes. And at the other end of the spectrum it's made a vast difference when it comes to the mundane technicalities of work and life. Speaking some Chinese is an obvious help when a reporter is suddenly caught in a whirl of fast-moving events without having the luxury of an interpreter – or a driver, or a dictionary, or a translation app -- nearby. It's helped me conduct interviews, cultivate sources, find transport, grasp subtle nuances of meaning in addition to black-and-white “facts”.

3 But most importantly, it's opened my eyes to how differently Chinese might view the world and their place in it, their relationships, their government. It brings a much deeper appreciation of the vast scale of the nation, and the huge regional differences *inside* China. If I had an interpreter constantly glued to my side, it would be easier to perceive China's 1.3 billion people as a monolithic bloc – everyone feeling the same feelings, dreaming the same dreams. I might even be tempted to commit that journalistic sin of declaring “China wants X” or “Chinese always do Y”. That would be a mistake.

4 I haven't said anything that you don't already know -- and no doubt have addressed much more articulately in your own papers. Now I'm going to say something that wouldn't normally be at the top of your lists of reasons why knowing Chinese makes a difference. At least in my early career, I discovered that ethnic Chinese born in the West (as I was) were often perceived as sub-standard – somehow *defective* -- if we couldn't speak the “mother tongue”. I vividly recall meeting mainland Chinese in the 1980s who would stare with surprise, wrinkle their brows, make sounds of incredulity – “How can you be Chinese and not *speak* Chinese?” They appeared to assume language ability was inherited genetically, along with black hair and brown eyes, by all ethnic Chinese.

5 My own parents, who moved to the United States right after WWII, retained vestiges of this “genetic theory of language ability transmission”, even though they intellectually knew better. I was born and brought up in the American Midwest; my mother stubbornly drilled me and my two US-born brothers in rudimentary Chinese at home, trying valiantly to help that dormant language ability bloom. But we had no Chinese playmates, no Chinese-language television shows, nothing to compel us to speak Chinese. As a result, we three very Americanized kids had a smidgeon of comprehension but very poor conversational skills. And virtually no reading or writing ability. One semester of “Beginning Chinese” at Harvard didn't improve things much for me.

6 It wasn't until I landed in Taipei in 1973 to learn about Peking opera, supported by a post-grad Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Travelling Fellowship, that reality hit home. I looked Chinese, but I couldn't speak Chinese. People treated me as if I were handicapped -- and, truth be told, I *felt*

handicapped. Even with helpful interpreters, I couldn't hold a heartfelt conversation. I couldn't understand political debates. I didn't even know the really juicy Chinese curse words. If my goal was to learn about Peking opera, I certainly couldn't succeed without speaking the language. That's when I began taking Mandarin lessons seriously.

7 How big a difference did those lessons make? For one thing, they helped launch my career. While studying Chinese opera in Taiwan, I'd began publishing freelance articles, and by 1975 I was Newsweek's regular Taipei stringer. It didn't occur to me that this was a real job, but I enjoyed the challenge. A number of far more experienced Western reporters already resided in Taipei, so I gravitated towards topics on which the others didn't focus so heavily: human rights cases and especially the *dangwai* 党外 -- literally "outside the party" -- political activists. They were called *dangwai* politicians because Taipei's martial-law regime allowed only a single ruling party and banned formal opposition. (Later, as Taiwan democratized, the *dangwai* activists became the backbone of the official opposition party.)

8 These activists took great risks. Any journalist covering them had to report fast, be discrete, and travel light -- usually without a translator. (In those days the Kuomintang regime sought ways to spy on foreign reporters and their sources; co-opting interpreters was an easy way to do that.) Partly because I could conduct interviews in Chinese, I was offered my first staff job in 1977 -- covering the Chinese economy for the Hong Kong-based Far Eastern Economic Review. Two years later, Beijing opened the door for U.S. correspondents to live and work in Beijing after the normalization of Sino-US relations. Newsweek wanted a Chinese-speaker to open the magazine's first Beijing bureau. Even though I was a relatively junior reporter, Newsweek offered me the job.

9 Arriving in Beijing in March 1980, I found a target-rich journalistic environment. In those heady post-Mao days, interest in China ran hot. For me, speaking Chinese helped me meet skittish sources who, just a few years earlier, had been lectured on the evils of the West. With at least some (albeit far from perfect) language ability under my belt, I no longer felt like a genetic mutant. This may not be a common reason why studying Chinese has made a difference -- and it may not even be a very good reason. But dropping into Beijing in 1980 was viscerally quite different from my arrival in Taipei seven years earlier. This time, as a Chinese-American, I felt comfortable with both the Chinese and American sides of my identity. And in my career, it helped embolden me to approach even the most aloof and unwelcoming interviewees, to drive just a hundred more miles down that perilous mountain track in Sichuan, to ask the most audacious questions.

10 I can't tell you how many times I've collected catchy anecdotes, colorful details, jokes, even insults because I could understand what was being said in Chinese. This was often true even in the presence of professional translators tasked with rendering everything into English. Often an interpreter (especially a government one) would translate Chinese into the most boring English-language platitudes imaginable -- but virtually ignore the most interesting bits. Perhaps those bits didn't seem important in the context of millennia of Middle Kingdom statecraft. Or perhaps they sounded a tad sensitive -- and the interpreter didn't want to get into hot water.

11 I'm reminded of an incident from the late 1980s (before the June 1989 bloodshed) that strummed some of these themes: Chinese-American identity, building up the confidence to ask outlandish questions, glimpsing insights when official translators stopped translating. The event was a Chinese government press conference and, paradoxically, on this occasion I decided to ask a question in English

and not in Chinese. (I know, this is supposed to be about why speaking Chinese makes a difference; but bear with me.)

12 To be sure, asking questions in English of a Chinese person almost always injects a sense of distance, a cultural divide between interviewer and interviewee – and that’s rarely good for a journalist. But for that very reason, at least during the 80s, some Chinese Foreign Ministry authorities fluent in English purposely spoke in Chinese on official occasions, patiently waiting as translators did their thing. They *wanted* that distance; I also suspect they exploited the time spent on translation to craft their answers to difficult questions.

13 In this situation, I’d hoped to emphasize that I was an *American* correspondent – not a Chinese one – by asking a question in English. In official press conferences, appearing Chinese wasn’t always an advantage; officials sometimes chose *not* to call on me to ask questions because they wanted to give Western reporters a chance to be called on. For some officials, the whole point of holding a press conference was to be seen to be engaging foreign media, even if you didn’t want to be.

14 I chose to speak English also because I planned to ask a question no Chinese reporter would ask. And I thought – naively, as it turned out -- the translator’s to-ing and fro-ing might buy me a moment to think of a sharp follow-up question. The star of this press conference was China’s paramount leader Deng Xiaoping. (Unlike today’s top officials, Deng took unscripted questions from media). He had recently relinquished a number of official posts, including the title of Vice Premier, but was still the top man in the state and party Central Military Commissions. Everyone was buzzing about what the changes meant -- and how long Deng planned to stay on as China’s most powerful man.

15 Taking a deep breath, I asked Deng: You’ve given up some posts, but how long will you retain the key military commission jobs; who is your successor and, with due respect, when will you finally retire? The room fell deathly silent. Deng didn’t bat an eyelash as the poor interpreter translated my question from English into Chinese. (To his credit, he translated the whole thing.) Deng was unfazed. He evenly responded that he had relinquished some titles but retained others. He didn’t actually answer the question. The interpreter translated Deng’s response, allowing a perceptible note of irritation to creep into his voice. Then with a dismissive wave of his hand, Deng moved on to the next question. Very soon he was finished with the press conference and walking towards the exit.

16 Was I in trouble? Would any of the Chinese officials in the room retaliate for what they might have considered a disrespectful question? As people milled about, waiting for Deng to leave the room, he paused to linger for a moment. I recall looking around to see if he had a security detail; I didn’t see any bodyguards. (Chinese leaders don’t do that anymore, either.)

17 Suddenly Deng was right in front of me. I found myself looking down on, and shaking hands with, China’s paramount leader. Despite being diminutive, Deng had gravitas. Media and officialdom immediately gathered around him. He peered at my face, with what I thought was a glint of bemusement in his eyes. He made a small, inquisitive sound in his throat – sort of *umm* spoken in a rising, or second, tone -- then asked in very thick dialect: “Are you Vietnamese?”

18 *Touche*. I had just been insulted -- in the subtlest possible way. Less than a decade earlier, China and Vietnam had fought a border war and relations were still touchy between the two rival nations. I took Deng’s question to mean he perceived me as “unfriendly”. Nearby, the hapless Chinese

government interpreter stood immobile; he didn't translate the question. Flustered, I managed to utter in Chinese: No, I was born in America and my parents were born in China. A lower-level official muttered in Chinese to Deng and others: "American citizen of Chinese descent" --almost as if he didn't recognize I'd been speaking Chinese. (In his defense, I may have been so discombobulated that I'd botched the tones.) "Ah, American," Deng responding, nodding his head, as if a mystery had been solved. Then he was gone.

19 Without having studied Chinese, I would not have known I was being put in my place by Deng Xiaoping. Yet I learned another lesson during this encounter. There are huge differences between China's regional spoken dialects. Bravo to those who can fully understand what their leaders are saying! As a journalist I'd listened to archival recordings of Mao Zedong. I'd watched Chiang Kai-shek on live television in Taiwan. I'd exchanged a couple words with Deng. It was a humbling experience to strive to understand these famous Chinese strongmen. What does it do to a Chinese person when he or she can't understand what another Chinese is saying – and what if that other Chinese is the most important person in their world?

20 Listening to Chinese people from different parts of the country speak Chinese is a powerful way to smash the myth of China-as-monolith – or, for that matter, the myth of an omniscient, flawlessly functioning leadership. The diversity of the Chinese people hits home every time I travel in the provinces, encountering local dialects that are a far cry from the clear, carefully enunciated *putonghua* I tried so hard to learn. A couple years ago I went to rural Zhejiang province to research a WWII event that had taken place in a remote mountain village. My travelling companions were a Chinese historian from the inland Zhejiang city of Quzhou, a 20-something Beijing woman, and my husband Alan who's a Chinese-speaking Brit. We rode in a minibus driven by a man from the Zhejiang port of Ningbo.

21 I wound up trying to interview a octogenarian villager who looked like he'd stepped straight out of the Chinese historical novel *Shui Hu Zhuan* 水浒传 (often translated as "The Water Margin" or "Outlaws of the Marsh") – wizened face, flowing grey beard, long hair twirled into a messy bun on the top of his head, tobacco-stained fingernails. I was keen to find out what the village had looked like in 1942. Mr. Water Margin seemed equally keen to tell me.

22 Problem was, I couldn't understand a word he was saying. Nor could my fellow travelers. With one exception: it transpired that the minibus driver could just make out the old man's words, so I managed to extract some information, with the driver translating into *putonghua*. Later I discovered Zhejiang local dialects are notoriously incomprehensible, even for many Chinese; Wenzhouhua 温州话 in particular is so esoteric that Wenzhou natives were used as WWII "codetalkers" by Kuomintang authorities in much the way Navajo speakers were by the American military.

23 But, wait. Isn't this about all the good things that result when we speak Chinese? Then why am I describing the *inability* to understand Mr. Water Margin, despite having spent years learning Chinese? Actually, that's part of my point. By studying Chinese, one discovers how many mutually unintelligible spoken dialects there are. By realizing that, one is struck by the importance of the written Chinese word: it's some kind of miracle that literate Chinese can communicate with each other through writing, even when they can't understand each other's speech. (Another challenge with Mr. Water Margin was that he didn't appear to be able to write.)

24 Sharing a common written language is a cultural glue that helps bind much of Chinese society together. It's not just writing; it's art as well. The beauty of calligraphy is perhaps another reason why Chinese feel such an attachment to their words. I confess that I enjoy that moment, which sometimes comes in a Chinese conversation, when someone starts "air-writing" on the palm of one hand with an index finger, tracing the strokes of a word that he or she wants so earnestly to be understood. I'm thrilled when I can recognize the air-written word -- not always the case, by any means -- and I appreciate that the physical gesture can seem so elegant. Many languages sound lovely, or have visual flair. But how many can claim tactile appeal? (In his book "Chinese Lessons," friend and author John Pomfret also admired the "balletic flourish" of what I call air-writing, deeming it "marvelously inefficient.")

25 Have you ever watched Chinese men in a public square using a massive broom-sized calligraphy brush to "paint" sinuous Chinese characters on the pavement, using plain water instead of ink? It's mesmerizing to watch the words disappear as the water evaporates, and to see the calligrapher patiently tracing another one. And another and another. This primordial bond between Chinese and their writing helps explain how they regard their language, their society, and other Chinese. Back in the 1980s, journalists Jay and Linda Mathews -- who opened the Beijing bureaus for the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times, respectively -- noted this special connection in their book "One Billion: a China Chronicle". "In some mystic fashion the characters hold the secret of the unity of China, and unity is something the historically minded Chinese do not take for granted," they wrote, "The spoken language has eight major dialects, representing several millennia of hostility, bias and distrust."

26 I mentioned how some Chinese saw me as genetically "flawed" when I couldn't speak Chinese. I should also point out the converse is true. Caucasians often are *not* expected to speak Chinese, certainly not well. These days, Caucasian visitors who can speak a sentence of Chinese, even with mangled tones, are often praised lavishly by Chinese acquaintances. However in the 80s and even 90s, quite a number of Chinese seemed unable to comprehend that a Caucasian could ever speak Chinese -- even when the white guy was indeed speaking Chinese, and quite well.

27 Jay Mathews, the Washington Post reporter, found this terribly amusing. Jay, his wife Linda, and I were part of the first wave of American correspondents to be permitted to reside in China, after officials in Washington and Beijing announced they would normalize Sino-US diplomatic relations on Jan. 1, 1979. During that period we and other American correspondents lived in the Soviet-inspired (and, in the case of my room, bat-infested) Qianmen Hotel. We often swapped anecdotes over lunch or dinner. Once Jay and Linda recounted a hilarious anecdote about Chinese belief in the exceptionalism of their mother tongue; The story was later included in their book "One Billion":

**28 "Foreigners who try to bridge this gap and deal with the Chinese in their own language find many Chinese do not even believe this is possible. There is a story about a British diplomat who had taken honors in Oriental languages at Cambridge and had lived in Peking for years. Driving toward Tianjin, he took a wrong turn and stopped to ask directions in his flawless northern accent from a couple of peasants standing at the roadside: "Is this the road to Tianjin?"**

**"Eh? What did you say?"**

**"Which way to Tianjin?"**

**“Sorry, we don’t understand foreign languages”**

**“Is this the way to Tianjin?”**

**“Beg your pardon, we only speak Chinese”**

**The diplomat gave up in disgust and started his car. Then, just before he pulled away, he heard one peasant say to the other, “Wasn’t that strange? I could have sworn that foreign was asking directions to Tianjin.”**

29 Today it’s become easier for Chinese to believe foreigners can speak Chinese. And it’s much easier for Westerners to experience that curiously intimate sense of belonging, or inclusiveness, that can result when an outsider speaks to a Chinese person in Chinese – even when official propaganda tries to discourage such discourse. One evening in the early 90s I was leaving a Sichuan restaurant hidden deep in the hutongs with an American friend – a young Caucasian man -- who was studying Chinese in Beijing. It was a balmy night. We hailed a pedicab and asked the driver to meander slowly through the hutongs, and point out any interesting architecture on the way to a nearby subway stop.

30 “Is your friend an American?” the driver asked me in Chinese as he pedaled. “Yes,” I answered, “Why?” The man said, “Okay, I’ll tell you something in Chinese but please don’t translate into English. This is very secret; we can’t let the American know.” I agreed, amused by what I initially perceived to be the ironies of our situation. First, I assumed the pedicab man had no clue that I might be an American myself; instead, he must have thought I was Chinese. Second, it appeared to me that the pedicab man thought my friend couldn’t understand Chinese. (In fact, his language ability was quite good; later he served in the U.S. government as a senior advisor on Asian affairs.) We both figured we might be in for a fascinating conversation, so long as my friend pretended not to know Chinese.

31 We trundled off through the hutongs. The driver pointed out some lovely old courtyards. Then he came to an especially grand door with elaborate paintings, with what looked like a striking courtyard beyond. “China’s foreign minister used to live here,” said the driver, dropping his voice to a stage whisper, “He was deeply involved in the foreign policy of the time”. Then the guy launched into an extraordinarily detailed narrative about a 1970 military coup in, of all places, Cambodia, dropping names in Chinese which I couldn’t recognize. (This was one of those times when I scrambled mentally in a less-than-successful effort to understand it all.)

32 I managed to piece together that the coup had toppled Sihanouk and paved the way for Cambodia’s rightwing Prime Minister Lon Nol to take power – “he was supported by the CIA!” declared the driver conspiratorially, “Yet even with backing from the American military, Lon Nol couldn’t last long!” (Indeed, Lon Nol fled Phnom Penh in 1975, and the Khmer Rouge took over.) “It was a victory for China, and this foreign minister played an important role,” crowed our guide, “He lived in this very house!” We reached the subway stop, tipped our guide generously and watched as he pedaled off into the darkness. Then we started giggling about the “top secret” history lesson we’d just received from a pedicab driver.

33 At first we congratulated ourselves on our little “scoop”. The pedicab man had revealed to us his intriguing tale because he didn’t know I was an American, nor that my friend could understand Chinese. But the more we thought about it, the more it didn’t hold up. When we first flagged him down, the guy had heard us talking in both (native) American English and in (non-native) Chinese. So why would he

pretend he was withholding confidential information from prying American ears? In the end we came to a surprising conclusion: in fact the guy *knew* that I wasn't a local and that my friend *could* understand him. Despite our being foreigners – who shouldn't be privy to Chinese secrets, even old ones -- he liked our love of the hutongs and simply wanted to tell his Cambodia story. And this was one time when he could spin that tale all in Chinese, and we might even know enough to recognize it to be real. (My memory is hazy, but I believe the courtyard that triggered it all had been inhabited by the late Madame Zhang Hanzhi, Mao's onetime English tutor and wife of the late Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua.)

34 Nuance is important in Chinese. Early in my career, I recall once using the phrase *suan zhang* 算账 – often translated as “settling accounts” – when asking for the dinner bill in a restaurant. Chinese cousins who were with me quietly explained I shouldn't use that phrase, because *suanzhang* usually has a political tinge. It actually means “settling scores” – as in taking revenge. There was an awkward lull in the dinner conversation; I mentally kicked myself for the *faux pas*. My cousins' father – my uncle -- had just returned to Shanghai after having been politically rehabilitated; during Mao's time he'd been labelled a “rightist” and banished for years to the hardscrabble countryside on the edge of the Gobi desert. I had heard rumors that some members of his own family had turned against him during the Cultural Revolution, denouncing him to belligerent Red Guards. “Settling scores” was not a welcome topic. In the presence of those cousins I never uttered the phrase *suanzhang* again.

35 And some concepts are just different enough in Chinese, compared to their English translations, that revelations into a slightly different Chinese psyche, or worldview, are automatically exposed. The English word “grandfather” doesn't reflect the rigidly hierarchical and meticulously defined nature of Chinese family relationships. There is no single word in Chinese for “grandfather”, but rather different words for “maternal grandfather” and “paternal grandfather”. Similarly what you call sibling depends on whether they're male or female, younger or older. Things get quite complicated when cousins come into the picture.

36 Meanwhile new Chinese phrases – or newly evolving definitions -- keep popping up. While renovating a rural cottage in the valley of the Ming Tombs not far from the city, I asked my builder to find some appropriately colored window frames. He phoned me excitedly, having found what he thought was a good color. He described it in Chinese as “a sort of gold color, but not yellow-gold, more greenish.” I rattled off some possibilities: Beige? Cappuccino? Champagne? He said, “We used to call it champagne but now there's another name, one I can't remember.” A light bulb went off in my head. “Is it what people call *tuhaojin* 土豪金?” I asked, using a term that means something like “nouveau riche gold”. (I knew it only because I had had to buy a *tuhaojin*-colored iPad since all the other colors were sold out.) “That's it,” exclaimed the builder, “Nouveau riche gold.”

37 For most Chinese, especially those 35 and above, *tuhao* is a largely derogatory term much as “nouveau riche” is in English. Yet a number of Beijing 20-somethings I've met don't consider it negative at all. *Tuhao* “is a good thing. People want to be *tuhao*,” insisted a 28-year-old Beijing woman who had been my Chinese teacher and now is a good friend. “Who doesn't want to be rich?”

38 Some new phrases come to us thanks to the rise of social media. One, which emerged first on Weibo, is chock full of delicious contradictions. The phrase is *xianmu jidu hen* 羡慕嫉妒恨 – “admiration, jealousy, hatred” – and it refers to a single, complex emotion that combines envy, distaste, and a longing to imitate. People might simply write *xianmu jidu hen* after a tweet in which someone has

just described a recent, wildly expensive vacation. In other words, it's the kind of ambivalence you'd feel when observing the shenanigans of the nation's fast-growing *tuhao* class.

39 For a journalist seeking to make sense of a deeply complex society, these nuggets are precious. Language matters. Regardless of how organized a correspondent is, regardless of how many office assistants and interpreters are hired, there are crucial moments when translators are simply not around. I still remember vividly an incident that unfolded in the lobby of the Beijing Hotel in early June 1989, a few days after Chinese troops opened fire on civilian demonstrators in the streets of the capital.

40 A few weeks earlier, Newsweek's Beijing bureau had been pretty well-staffed with translators and drivers. During weeks of peaceful student-led protests, I'd taken full advantage of this army of helpers. I was then Newsweek's Hong Kong-based Asia Regional Editor, and the magazine had arranged for me to be accredited as acting bureau chief because the Beijing Bureau Chief would be on maternity leave. The event that I *thought* I'd be covering was Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's ground-breaking visit to China, thawing decades of Sino-Soviet chill. My Newsweek colleague in Moscow, Carroll Bogert, was also flown to Beijing. A close friend and former protégé, Carroll spoke Russian – as well as very good Chinese.

41 Of course, Gorby became a sideshow as the protests escalated. And one by one the bureau's Chinese staff stopped coming to work. I didn't object; in fact I'd told them they could stay home with their families if they felt the risks of working were too great. To make things more efficient, I rented a room at the Beijing Hotel, close to the epicenter of the demonstrations, Tiananmen Square. It had large balconies facing the main boulevard leading into the square. (Newsweek's bureau, and the hotel where I normally slept, were a couple miles further east.) Having this convenient bolthole would allow me to report in the square, then duck into the Beijing Hotel to dictate my stories to New York over the phone. I needed to be able to act quickly, in case all hell broke loose.

42 All hell did break loose. Beijing's leaders ordered the People's Liberation Army to clear the square and extinguish the protests. The weekend of June 3-4 was a howling maelstrom of rumor, gunfire, panic, bloodied civilians, tanks rolling through the streets. My Beijing Hotel room – initially seen by some of my editors as a costly extravagance – had become a necessity, and a refuge, as I and my colleagues took turns reporting in Tiananmen and filing from the hotel. After PLA troops crushed the demonstrations, I left the Beijing Hotel to get some clean clothes. When I tried to return I found the area cordoned off by military personnel. I couldn't get in for several days. Finally the cordon was lifted and I went to pay the hotel bill, asking Carroll to come along for moral support.

43 We walked, footsteps echoing, through the nearly empty lobby and approached the front desk. I'd already rehearsed in my mind what I'd say (in Chinese) to the clerk, hoping not to have to pay for the days when I was barred entry to the hotel. I gave the date when I first rented the room, then calmly asked the clerk to deduct from my bill those days when the hotel was inaccessible "because of the situation in Tiananmen Square." He stared at me and asked stonily, "What situation in Tiananmen Square? There is no situation in Tiananmen Square."

44 This was too much. My voice began rising: "What do you mean! Haven't you seen all the killing? It was right outside your hotel window! Tell the truth!" I felt like vaulting over the desk to confront the clerk; hotel security men nervously began edging toward me in case I really did try something aggressive like that. "There's been no killing," the clerk insisted. "Nobody died in the

square." At that point I nearly collapsed with rage, fatigue and frustration. I ranted and cursed in Chinese. Carroll thankfully dragged me out of there.

45 Is it worth it? Are decades' of language study worth a dramatic firsthand anecdote, and the satisfaction of cursing at a lowly apparatchik in Chinese? If you put it that way, of course not. But is the effort worth being able to peek into the soul of an ancient society, sharing direct experiences with ordinary Chinese, sometimes surprising devoid of artifice? My years of Chinese language study have made a huge difference in unintended ways, certainly in my job but also in my life – and not just in China.

46 One of the most memorable interviews I've conducted in Chinese took place not in Beijing but in Baghdad. It was early 2003. I was assigned to report in Iraq as long as I was able, ideally to cover the fall of Saddam Hussein. Truth be told, there wasn't much ground-breaking reporting to be done while his regime was still in power. I decided to contact as many foreign diplomats as I could find in Baghdad, to gather their predictions about what the coming ground war, and the post-Saddam era, would be like.

47 It was a jittery time for all foreigners, with many planning to depart the Iraqi capital before the ground war broke out. Many Westerners had already evacuated; I managed to interview a few European diplomats before they disappeared. In general, they were cautiously optimistic. More than once I heard people speculate that Iraqis would be "dancing in the streets" when the U.S. Marines arrived in Baghdad. Eventually I ran out of Western diplomats to interview, so I phoned the Chinese embassy.

48 Speaking in Chinese, I asked for the ambassador. To my surprise, he came to the phone right away, and readily agreed to meet me. The ambassador was thoughtful and unusually candid for a Chinese official. He painted a grim scenario. The fall of Saddam Hussein would set into motion some dangerous and unpredictable events. There could be looting and chaos. Pro-Saddam tribal militia would launch a guerilla war. The use of chemical weapons couldn't be ruled out; they'd been used before. Many Iraqis dislike Saddam Hussein, but they would resent even more intruders perceived as a quasi-colonial force.

49 At the end of a long and somber session, the ambassador warned me against staying in Baghdad for the ground war. He offered me a ride in a convoy of Chinese diplomatic vehicles, which would soon evacuate the Iraqi capital and drive through the desert to Jordan. I politely declined his generous offer; I told him that as an American journalist I considered it my assignment to cover Saddam Hussein's fall. For days after that meeting, the ambassador's personal assistant contacted me regularly to urge me to join the diplomats heading for Amman.

50 In hindsight, the Chinese ambassador's briefing was probably the most helpful (and prescient) one I'd had in Baghdad. I didn't join his diplomatic convoy. But, sobered by his pessimism, I beefed up my security preparations at the Palestine Hotel. I used a massive amount of duct tape to tape the windows of my hotel room, so they wouldn't shatter during the coming U.S. "shock and awe" bombing campaign. I moved down from an upper-floor hotel room to one easier to escape from, close to the ground.

51 In the end, the moment of greatest danger to media staying at the Palestine Hotel erupted when a U.S. tank shell hit an upper-floor balcony where some European journalists had been photographing the American advance with telephoto lenses (they'd been mistaken for snipers by the American tank crew).

I saw one reporter being carried down the stairs in a blanket by his colleagues, his eyes staring and his torso bleeding massively; he later died. How big a difference did studying Chinese make in my career? Could it possibly have helped save my life?

52 It's not easy to predict exactly where, how and why studying Chinese might make a big difference in anyone's life -- just as I had no idea speaking with the Chinese ambassador would be useful to me in Baghdad. Through studying Chinese, one absorbs a vast amount of insight into Chinese society. Sure, learning Chinese can help you read Chinese books. But what can be learned goes way behind that. Studying a pictograph, watching how people say it, write it, describe its history -- all these activities impart deep knowledge about Chinese people, their hopes and fears. As Beijing's profile rises in the world, and its influence grows, peeking into the Chinese psyche in this way is a shortcut to understanding this rising, and at the same time ancient, power.

(end)

---