

What Difference has Learning Chinese Made in My Career?

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Below I would like to offer some thoughts on how I got involved in studying Chinese; how it impacted my career; some observations on why learning the language is important; along with some of the language's interesting, fun and occasionally frustrating aspects

How it began

Learning Chinese could not have had a bigger difference to my career. In high school, I was an aspiring national team volleyball player and also, like many peers, enrolled in the pre-commerce program at the University of Calgary (my father was in the oil industry, and encouraged me to study petroleum engineering or commerce). Had I continued on that path, I may have wound up on the Olympic team as one career track, or perhaps in Calgary's oil and gas industry, fairly conventional in that city. I enjoyed math, but the rest of that curriculum was not very interesting, and I had a budding desire to see and learn more of the rest of the world, just not via playing volleyball in gyms in different countries. But I had no clue as to what to do instead. Until, while browsing through university catalogues during a boring summer job, I stumbled upon two things: a Bachelor's program at McGill University majoring in Modern Languages and requiring the study of any two languages that was neither French nor English, 2) a summer intensive Chinese language program in Shanghai. That was my "Eureka" moment: I would attend the summer program, and I would go to McGill to major in Spanish and Chinese (I studied French as well, though I didn't receive any credit for it).

Why Chinese and Spanish? I had figured out that I wanted to learn languages, and figured that to study the main United Nations languages would be a good way to start, with the added advantage that French is helpful in Canada to acquire bilingual status, for any future government jobs. (In later years, I studied intensive Russian in graduate school, thus covering all the UN languages except for Arabic; and I subsequently studied some Japanese and Korean as well). And with respect to Chinese, I was developing a sense in the early 1980s that China would become influential one day, and that I should be a part of it. Finally, it did not hurt that Chinese was pretty unconventional in those days (circa 1983); because in Calgary, people did not even speak French, far less Chinese, so many thought I was crazy.

Now What

My first Chinese class, I was sitting in the language lab with the other students, and the speaker's voice on the tape started: "mā, má, mǎ, mà ... pēng péng pěng pèng...". These were the strangest sounds I had ever heard, so I took off the head phones and looked around the room, curious if other students' headsets were broken as well. Alas, it was functioning fine – *that* was Mandarin (or 普通话, 国语, 华语, 中文, 汉语, as it is alternatively named). Wow. Then when I got to Shanghai for my 2-month immersion program, even the language teachers spoke

Mandarin with a different accent. Welcome to the wonderful world of Chinese dialects, and in those days a lot fewer people in Shanghai spoke Mandarin than they do today. After finishing my B.A., the first Shanghai experience was still an exciting memory that felt too short; so I decided to return to Shanghai for post-graduate study at Fudan University, where I stayed for two years. There I was able to study a wide range of courses: classical literature; political economy; Chinese economic history; and my favorite - Maoist Thought, in which class I was the only student (Chinese students preferred studying practical things like math, or economics). Knowledge of Chinese also gave an understanding how official China, via the Ministry of Education, attached a Marxist or Maoist or historic determinist, or dialectical spin to virtually everything. I didn't necessarily agree, but at least I could learn about how they thought about these matters. Chinese also enabled me to get to know a wide range of Chinese people, including my roommates from Anhui and Hunan, and therefore develop a more comprehensive understanding of the society.

How my career chose me

After graduating from Columbia University's Masters of International Affairs program, my initial career aspirations were related to the military or the Foreign Service. So I enrolled in the Canadian Armed Forces and received my commission as a Second Lieutenant, destined for a specialty as an infantry officer. At this stage of my career, Chinese was not so relevant, except to get me invited to the Department of Defense Headquarters to attend a meeting with China's Military Attaché, who was on a charm campaign to get back in the good graces of Western governments, this being only one year after the Tiananmen massacre. He showed the assembled senior officers (I was invited because I was the only Chinese speaker at Headquarters) a video of Chinese special forces soldiers performing all sorts of qigong feats (a truck running over a plank on a soldier's chest; breaking bricks on one's head; bending a spear with the throat, etc.). After the video, I could not resist as I spoke to the Attaché: "That was very impressive, but how do they do against bullets?" Beyond that, the drill instructors at the Combat Arms Training Center were very amused to have me count out pushups, or the drill cadence, in Chinese. But at the time, Chinese capability would only be relevant longer term, were I to be sent one day to China to be Military Attaché. Then three things happened: I was temporarily paralyzed in a parachute landing, which led me to reconsider my career priorities; I applied to the Foreign Service; and I was offered a job to be a department manager of an (American) equipment distribution business in Beijing.

After weighing the opportunities, I concluded that the opportunity to go to Beijing immediately for a business role outweighed the possibility of being posted to Beijing, at some future point, in a government role. Chinese language ability now became central to my career, because it was one of the job requirements, and part of the interview was conducted in it. So for most of the next 25 plus years I lived in Beijing and moved from the first job into consulting; trading and distribution; and finally manufacturing, where for the past 11 years I was the President, China for Crane Company, a US multinational manufacturer of "highly engineered industrial products".

What's more, though I was already able to read, write and speak, equipment sales allowed me to learn new fields of vocabulary, such as commercial and technical details. More broadly, studying and working in the country allowed me to witness 3 decades of remarkable change, and to develop a reasonable understanding of what is happening on the ground.

What are some ways in which learning Chinese is important?

- There is no better way to learn about the people of a different country than to converse with a wide of them, in their language
- It hones your communication skills – both verbal and non-verbal, which is of great help when involved in negotiations with customers or suppliers, as it allows you a clearer sense of their negotiating posture, pain points, bottom line etc.
- Customer/supplier intimacy - Chinese counterparts are very proud of their history, culture, language and literature. And so they appreciate the foreigner who makes the commitment to learning about China – not enough to win the business in and of itself, but it certainly allows me to spend more time with the customer's boss, and to gain greater insights, than the typical businessperson who has to go through an interpreter. My company was a relatively small, and yet I have developed close relations with the CEOs of a number of large customers, who normally would spend no time talking to a tier-2 supplier. One such CEO invited me to dinner at his house (which normally never occurs in China), where we put on slippers and started negotiating price at 2230 hrs. in his kitchen, over wine and cigars. When I introduced him to my successor, he asked why the company wasn't going to send another Chinese speaking foreigner to replace me. On another occasion, we had a dinner with the leader of a major state owned power plant contractor that was scheduled for two hours, but went on for 5, with the GM commenting that this said first time can talk with a foreigner about everything from the 2nd Amendment, to religion to Chinese history and literature. This would not have happened if I didn't speak Chinese, and our company benefited from this level of customer intimacy. And whether it lasts 5 hours or not, speaking Chinese is extremely helpful at the frequent banquets that are part of doing business in China, when people may prefer to about culture, history, or the US Presidential election.
- Speaking Chinese makes you more effective in your role overall. I have seen many examples - the Frenchman running a 50/50 Joint Venture in Wuhan, say, or the American running a 50/50 Joint Venture in Xian – where non-Chinese speakers are so ill served by their interpreters, that one must wonder how on earth they can function in these roles and make effective decisions, without being able to weigh all the facts and to hear – accurately - all sides of the story.
- You can directly issue clear instructions and deploy company culture all the way down to the factory floor, where you can interact with the shop floor operators, working to make their work easier and the customer satisfied.

- You can be the interpreter for your organization, guaranteeing that its leadership understands all aspects and all nuances of what is being said, and allowing you to help facilitate a positive result for your boss or your client. It may be frequently stated that foreign business people have always made the mistake of forgetting Economics or Business 101 as soon as they step off the airplane in China. But I always tell people that the most important thing they need is an excellent interpreter, because they are putting their business future into someone else's mouth. To back up the point, I once gave a presentation to our Board of Directors, and starting speaking in Chinese for several minutes. Amidst befuddled looks from the room, I switched to English and said, "And now your interpreter says to you: "They don't agree", a frustrating experience I have witnessed all too many times. Do not just leave it up to the Chinese side to provide the interpreter, because you run the risk that they will skew wording and meaning to suit their interests. So important is this notion that when my CEO once needed an interpreter for a meeting in the US, I interviewed the candidate – a native Chinese speaker – for two hours to ensure she was up to the standards I had taught my CEO to expect.
- It is important to be able to read contracts in Chinese. Be attentive of differences between "should" 该 versus "must" 必须. And be careful with the ruling language clause, because I have seen examples where the English version states that the English version rules in case of language differences, whereas the Chinese version says that Chinese rules. If the contracts are based on PRC law, one can assume the ruling would be that the Chinese version rules. Another pet peeve of mine is that China contracts like to refer to Party A, B, C, rather than Smith Company, Jones Company or Crane Company. I have seen cases where, several pages into the contract, the drafter mixes up Party A and B, which in my view would be harder to do – and easier to spot - if the drafter would simply write that Smith is selling to Jones. So I find myself always revisiting the first page to reconfirm who is A and who is B. I have also seen drafters use the character for sell 卖 when they should be using buy 买. And I recently made a wire transfer to an individual surnamed 蒋, but in the bank instructions I entered 将, which caused the receiving bank to reject the transaction and me to waste a lot of time doing it again. Such typos are understandable; inevitable, perhaps. But I have seen Joint Venture contracts structured and drafted so badly, that I have to assume that the foreign party really did not understand what was being said – a case of bad interpreting, or did the foreign party, ignorant of the importance of a good interpreter, simply allow someone from the Chinese partner handle all the negotiations? If so, this is great for the Chinese party, who get to control the negotiations, but not so great for the foreign party, which may wind up signing an agreement that is not in its interest.
- Knowledge of Chinese is important during all aspects of a negotiation, but is an especially good tool for releasing tension during those stress-laden moments. My sales director and I had to face a customer, who our US-based factory had saddled with a serious quality defect, impacting a billion dollar refinery schedule. During a very tense

moment, the customer anxiously asked, “When will the valves be fixed and installed”? We could not readily answer this question because this was up to the factory in California and outside our immediate control. So, feeling the need to release some tension in the room, I used a 歇后语, a two-part enigmatic but humorous folk simile:

八路军唱歌 ...

没谱.

The customer could not help but burst out laughing, which certainly helped defuse that situation. In fact, I am called upon frequently to do this in China, where you have to be intimate with the customer in order to win the order, only to have to go back in to apologize – and trying to maintain good relations - for the inevitable quality or delivery problem. This can be frustrating but it is the nature of business and of the job.

Chinese has its challenges

Chinese has a large vocabulary that can drill down to a great level of detail. But people frequently don't use it that way, because the language also has plenty of words that allow the speaker to go on and on without saying anything concrete. When I am looking into a matter, I may ask “When did this happen?”? Only to get the response: “以前” (before), which leaves me to repeat the question in a way that allows less wiggle room. So I will repeat “几月几号?” (What month and day?) Or even “几点钟?” in an attempt to triangulate and pin them down. Less so now, but in previous decades you would ask someone when they are coming over, and they would say “after eating” 吃完了以后, which you have to use context and experience to assume after lunch. I once had an equipment delivery due in Tibet, and in order to schedule technicians from overseas for installation and commissioning I needed to know the date the goods would arrive. So as I tracked the goods from the Tianjin port across China on the way to Tibet, I called the local prefect chief if the goods had arrived yet. He responded: “越来越差不多了” (increasingly almost), a humorous but useless statement from the point of view of someone who needs to make plans. Frequently you will ask, in reference to an overdue payment: “When will you pay?” But in response you receive anything but a firm date. Such vagueness can very useful when a party does not want to be pinned down, but very frustrating for the party needing a straight answer. Though I must admit to using the technique myself, one example being a lengthy banquet toast, where a guest commented, “那个人绝对可以当党员”! (He can definitely be a Party member).

Numbers can be another challenge, because Chinese uses a base-10 system, unlike the base-10 in English. Thus 1 million becomes one hundred ten thousands (一百万); and one billion is ten one hundred millions (十亿). So if someone ever comes up with a number that sounds way

out of line, you may quietly query whether they meant thousand or million. I once interpreted for a client who used the figure 4 trillion, leaving me scrambling to come up with forty thousand one hundred millions 4 万亿.

Beyond the conversational, it is important to substantive terminology and concepts, such as, in the business world, strategy, marketing, quality, manufacturing, etc. There exist fluent Chinese speakers, but who are unable to communicate anything substantive, so when a global VP sales asks me if I have an engineering background, I take it as a compliment. But I do sometimes joke that only speaking one sentence of Chinese would be best: 听不懂，去做吧。This occurs when I ask for something to be done, only to hear long explanations of why it can't be done, about how “you must understand China”, 没有办法, etc. At that point, I want to use my one sentence – “I don't understand all of that, just make it happen” – and walk away.

Chinese Languages

What most of us learn to speak is called Mandarin or Putonghua. But travelling around the country one soon understands that there are many dialects, many so different so as to be mutually unintelligible. In fact, Cantonese or Fujian dialect are so different from Putonghua that I think they could be classified as separate languages, were it not for the domestic political imperative for there to be a single unitary Chinese state. In cities like Wenzhou and Nantong, even different districts have different dialects. My Nantong bank manager was transferred to another district in the city, and it took him months to understand the dialect in that district. Job candidates in Hangzhou will withdraw their resume when they learn the job offer is in Zhuji, a small city one hour south which dialect they feel impenetrable. Ask a Shanghainese speaker to pronounce *buy* “maa” and *sell* “maa” and they are reminded that these two words have the same pronunciation. You can then go on to joke that is why Shanghai people are good business people, able to conclude a transaction without necessarily knowing at the outset who is buying and who selling. And so it goes that most Chinese still speak accented Putonghua, if they speak it at all (some 400 million don't). Mao and Deng were famously difficult to understand, and arguably the first Chinese leader since Emperor Pu Yi to speak fluent Putonghua was Xi Jinping.

But familiarity with a local dialect can let you have some fun, too. In Shanghai for example, after the counterparty has had internal deliberations in their local dialect, on day two or three I will say a few words in Shanghai dialect, leaving them not only surprised, but rather worried about what I may have understood previously during their internal discussions. It is useful in negotiations not to reveal your entire hand; or all that you may know. Normally this is: 大智若愚; but I like to reverse it thus: 大愚若智. I also enjoy asking: “汉朝之前有没有汉族?” (Before the Han dynasty was there a Han people?)

So, in addition to being useful on the job, the language provides a rich window into the country's history, sense of humor, politics, and so on. And from a career perspective, Chinese language capability can establish you as someone serious; as someone who, having devoted the effort to

learning, has taken the country and its people seriously. So when their CEO introduces me to group of his company's managers as speaking better Mandarin than they do, it is a complement as well as a sign of respect.

Chinese is difficult because the written symbol has no relation to the way it sounds which means much rote memory work. It also has different tones where the same pronunciation in the flat tone means mother, whereas in the dropping tone it means to curse (妈 vs. 骂). In Western languages, or Korean, for example, at least there is a finite alphabet, with each letter having a unique and usually consistent pronunciation that allows you a relatively easier time figuring out how to pronounce a new word. The Kang Xi Dictionary from 1716 lists more than 47,000 plus characters; the Yitizi Zidian from 2004 lists more than 100,000, because new characters can be invented all the time. By way of reference, most educated people know between 2500 – 3000 characters. Some of the characters have been simplified, with strokes removed, to render literacy more readily available to the masses. But most have not been simplified, requiring significant stroke order memorization. Take, for example, “biáng”



a Shaanxi noodle dish which at 58 strokes is stated by some to be the longest character. Or my favorite: “zhé”



which, comprising 4 traditional characters for dragon, may not be as complex as biáng, but at 64 strokes is longer. Wonderfully, it means “verbose”

It may require a lot of memorization, but the characters do offer a visual meaning in a way that alphabet languages do not. The character for family 家, refers to a pig under a roof, highlighting that traditional rural families lived with their source of protein. Traditional attitudes to women are revealed by characters such as “安”(peace - that comes with only one woman in the house); or 姦 (adultery and debauchery); or 好 (good – is a woman with child). It is often easier to understand the name of a disease in Chinese, then in its Western medicine Latin equivalent. And in my work, we refer a lot to a lean manufacturing concept, developed by the Japanese, called

kaizen, or continuous improvement. The corresponding character (改善) offers a much more vivid image of this notion of changing for the better.

My most recent role was China president of a multinational manufacturer, where I could learn the relevant lean manufacturing concepts and deploy them in Chinese; and help the CEO and Board understand a great deal more about what goes on in China and how to do business there. My company had a number of issues when I took on the role, and through the ability to communicate in Chinese - as well as to lead, to set expectations, and to achieve alignment across the global business units - we were able to eliminate the vast majority of the issues, to resolve a nasty strike, and to grow the China revenues by 600% during my tenure. I do not think this would have been possible without the ability to communicate locally. I also believe it is no coincidence that my predecessor, who was on duty during the period when all the problems were created, spoke no Chinese.

In Sum

Learning Chinese impacted the entire trajectory of my life since university. It helped me have an interesting and rewarding China-based career for 25 years; and it will continue to do so after relocating to the San Francisco area (known by some as the “Bei Area”), where I shall still be involved in China-related matters, business or otherwise.

Any language is worth learning, because it provides a window into that people’s perspective. But Chinese is unique. It may take more effort to learn but, with 1.4 billion people and the world’s second largest economy, China’s influence and position in the world can only increase, so the more non-Chinese able to communicate with that people the better. Beyond that, the country has a rich history, wonderful literature, sense of humor, etc., that is best accessed through its language; something that positions you well for a lifetime of learning. It may even be good for your brain, given all the memorization. I mean, who hasn’t heard the equivalent of “Oh, you speak Chinese, you must be so smart!” So I encourage everybody to study it, not just because it is useful and important, but because it can be very interesting and a lot of fun, and why not have a fun and interesting career?

But I also encourage non-Chinese people to cultivate a Chinese accent, so that on the phone they don’t know you are a foreigner, and thus cannot find you in the lobby where you have arranged to meet. This can be amusing, almost as much so as the fitness center assistant who asked me if I was Chinese. My Chinese name is 高杰, so I took the opportunity to introduce myself as China’s latest minority, the 高族。