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

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

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

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

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

My first-year grades at Loyola Academy, a Jesuit secondary school in my home town of Wilmette, landed me among the top ten students in my class. As a result, I was invited to join an honors track in the second year, which included courses in ancient Greek and modern Chinese.
I received a letter from the school enclosing an IBM 360 print out -- an ancient relic of early computing -- a khaki-colored card with tiny rectangular holes punched through it.

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

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

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

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

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

*“Chinese Language Programs in American Secondary Schools 1960-? “. 
His logic was that I would be in a very elite group of college applicants who would have 3 years of Chinese studies. He was right, of course. This would become the first instance when having a Chinese studies background served me well in a competitive selection process.

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

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

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

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

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

The class size plummeted on the second day, with 20 defectors. The remaining 20 of us had decent intentions, but were easily swayed by the
antics of a handful of agents provocateur among us, who perpetrated all manner of tricks on our dedicated but gullible teacher.

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

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

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

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

Around the same time, my late Mom offered a remarkable insight while I was doing homework at the dining table. I’d been studying Chinese for about one year at this stage.
“I know what’s going to happen to you, “ she said confidently, with a far-away gaze.

“What ?!” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I chose education as my minor. I did my student teaching, and in 1973 became the first teacher of Chinese at the secondary and primary levels to be certified by the State of New Jersey Department of Education.
Because I was the first, that part of the certification process requiring a certified teacher in the subject to observe and “pass” the applicant could not be satisfied. The far-sighted state education authorities ruled that I would be allowed to observe myself, which I gladly did. As far as I could tell, I merited a pass.

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

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

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

Burgess was an accomplished student of linguistics as well as a composer. He noted with interest that I had studied modern and ancient Chinese, ancient Greek, Latin and Sanskrit. During one conversation in his office, he strongly encouraged me to keep copious notes of writing ideas, warning that failure to do so would result in the loss of a lot of valuable raw material in later years. I became even more of a committed diarist and note-taker.
Some of my classmates had the opportunity to spend a summer or junior year abroad, studying Chinese in Taiwan. In the early 1970s, the Chinese mainland was still essentially off-limits to American students.

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

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

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

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

I was interested in journalism but had no practical working experience. Education appealed to me, but I was unsure what a satisfying niche would be. Above all, I wanted to work in a field which gave me the chance to use my Chinese language skills. That was virtually impossible in the U.S.
at the time. I did not want to pursue an advanced degree, although I considered it an option for the future.

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

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

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

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

To my surprise, she called my name a few minutes later. I made my way forward and followed her gesture to be seated.
With an incredulous expression, she asked “**Let me get this straight...** you just graduated from Princeton with a degree in Asian studies and you wanna work as a busboy in this hotel?”

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

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

“Wait over there.”

She made a phone call.

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

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

Several months before, I had called on an employment agency specializing in media jobs. The head honcho was kind enough to meet me, but told me frankly that my Princeton degree and Chinese language skill would be of zero help in finding a journalism job in such a down market, especially since I lacked practical work experience. I’d heard this from prospective media employers as well, so was losing hope in finding an opening in the field.
To my surprise, he telephoned me some weeks later, and said he had lined up a possible job interview for me, for an editorial position with a trade association. Initially elated, my heart sank when he told me the prospective employer was the National Association of Truck Stop Operators. I was more than happy to consider an entry-level editorial position unconnected with China or Asia. However, I thought my chances of passing muster with the truckstoppers, as a longish-haired recent Ivy League graduate, were slim to nil.

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

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

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

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

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

I grew more restless and found my mind wandering to Chinese Asia, which for me really meant Taiwan and Hong Kong. Taiwan was the obvious preferred choice from a language viewpoint, but there remained
some practical challenges, such as finding the funds to get there, and the means to support myself once I arrived.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I derived great (and wholly unfounded) encouragement from the fact that an editor I knew at National Geographic agreed to take a look on spec at several story ideas which I proposed. This meant a lot to me at the time.
Later I found out that this was the standard response offered to just about anybody with half a story idea. Still, the confidence boost was timely.

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

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

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

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

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

I began to write my destination –“Vancouver”— on a sheet of cardboard. It struck me that a better option would be to write “Hong Kong”. I’d probably be the only hitch-hiker with a “Hong Kong” sign on I-80 westbound on that day, and possibly for the remainder of human history. It worked well, getting me rides in fairly short order, and prompting lively conversations.
One motorist stopped, offered me a ride, and said “You really goin’ to Hong Kong? Ain’t you goin’ the wrong way?” I said yes, and no.

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

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

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

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

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

It was a Saturday morning. He asked me if I was free for lunch. I laughed and said “Of course. You are the only person I know in Hong Kong.” He kindly brought me along to his Saturday luncheon group, called “Alcoholics Synonymous”, which included many iconic, veteran
foreign correspondents: Derek Davies, Richard Hughes, Anthony Paul, Anthony Lawrence, etc. He was clearly well connected, and not drawn to the group by alcohol, since he was a lifetime teetotaler.

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

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

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

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

Although his companies had other business lines – a public relations consultancy with blue chip clients like Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, Towngas, Kodak, etc.; print pre-production services; translation; and a freight forwarding company – the magazines were what piqued my interest.
When he passed away in 1975 after a brief bout with cancer, he was far too young to have given any thought to a succession plan. His various companies had different shareholders and directors, and the situation in the wake of his sudden death quickly became chaotic.

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

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

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

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

On my first morning in China, I was awakened at 6 a.m. by loudspeakers in the streets around the Dong Fang Hotel blaring out the thoughts of Chairman Mao and the current Party line, which happened to include denunciation of the American imperialists and their running dogs. For a fleeting moment I envisioned a cartoon image of myself as a loping
Golden Retriever wearing an Uncle Sam hat. After all those years of studying Chinese, this was a memorably hostile welcome message.

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

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

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

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

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

Luckily, revenues began to take off quickly after about one year, due to a variety of political and economic factors. Demand for industrial advertising, as well as technical translation and typesetting into simplified Chinese characters, was on the upswing. China had begun importing a wider range of industrial equipment and materials. Within a few years, we began publishing new, more specialized Chinese language technical journals, in construction, mining, machine tools, agriculture, etc.
My continuing travels to the Chinese mainland enabled me to witness first-hand the extraordinary transitions which began in the late 1970s, leading up to China’s Open Door policy in 1979. This was long before the 5-star hotels, high-speed rail links, and other luxurious creature comforts for travelers arrived in China.

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

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

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

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

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

The bad news was that the pesticides made life in the basement unpleasant for the rats, who swarmed upstairs into every corner of the
guest rooms, hallways, and dining facilities – a mass migration of vermin fit for an Alfred Hitchcock thriller.

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

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

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

In the end the young ladies disposed of the rat in a rather matter of fact manner, no doubt concluding that we foreigners are an easily excitable and rather odd bunch.
In Hong Kong, rather than socialize primarily in the colonial era expatriate circles, I chose to live on one of Hong Kong’s outer islands, Cheung Chau. A peaceful one-hour ferry ride from Central District, the island was a charming fishing village which still had pockets of rice paddies and small plot agriculture. Rents were a fraction of Hong Kong island’s, and it was a small enough community that you could get to know your neighbors, shopkeepers, police, etc. When I moved there, the non-Chinese population numbered less than 20, out of roughly 20,000 in total. I lived in a village house with a garden and lovely views of the South China Sea.

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

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

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

(Of Hong Kong’s many British civil servants, it was mainly the police who spoke Cantonese well.)


Driver: “Mormon missionary?” (Pairs of earnest young white-shirted Mormon missionaries were a common sight on Hong Kong streets. They
hit the ground speaking excellent Cantonese after their immersion programs in Utah.)

Me: “Nope.”

Driver : “American ?”

“Yep.”

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

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

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

China’s Open Door policy was an inflection point for the growth of our business , further cementing my interest in retaining a front-row seat for the dynamic and exciting changes which were unfolding in China , and in China’s relations with the world . Before I knew it , I’d passed the ten-year mark in Hong Kong . We were publishing several dozen different Chinese language magazines . We’d established a consulting division and some other ancillary service lines .
A few years after that I married Jenny Chen Ching, a native of Beijing, fulfilling my mother’s prophecy some two decades before. We’ve now been very happily married nearly thirty years, partnered in life, family-raising, and work.

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

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

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

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

We disengaged from technical, business to business magazines to focus on an exciting new project, which was launching the Chinese edition of
FORTUNE Magazine under license from Time Inc. We were their first licensee.

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

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

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

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

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

Improving one’s listening skills sits at the crossroads of Chinese language learning and acquisition of cross-cultural sensitivity. Chinese is a relatively subtle spoken language, in which tonality differentiates meaning. Chinese culture is also nuanced. If we Americans are known for our directness, Chinese people tend to behave at the more indirect
end of the spectrum. Becoming a better listener applies not only to Chinese but to one’s Mother Tongue.

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

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

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

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

We Americans place a very high value on individuality. In a fiercely competitive situation, we tend to have no compunctions about “killing” the other side as part of the end game. Chinese are more inclined towards thinking in terms of a group. Rather than fight the opponent to
the death, they are more likely to leave them a final escape route. Win, but allow the enemy to survive.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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