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Mary Kay Magistad
Princeton in Beijing essay

I have a confession to make. I am not fluent in Chinese. But I speak enough to have had many long conversations with forgiving friends and strangers, to have been able to hear, as a journalist in interviews over time, the real stories behind the official versions of events, to have exchanged jokes, opinions, life stories, and just plain human moments that transcend the limitations of language, and that have kept and probably always will keep pulling me back to China.

I am also not literate in Chinese, if literate means being able to read a newspaper, or a novel, or Tang poems. But the hundreds of characters I have learned have helped me understand the thinking and values behind the symbols, the emotional geography of an ancient civilization as it has morphed into a modern one.

Don't get me wrong. I deeply believe that being fluent and literate in Chinese is a huge boon to anyone's professional and personal life when living in China. I also know from personal experience that not everyone has the time or the linguistic gifts to pick up fluency in the midst of a busy professional life.

If you are mid-career, with little time to learn and many responsibilities to juggle, it might be tempting to just skip learning Chinese, or to pick up a few words and phrases around the edges, and call it good. I'm here to tell you that however much Chinese you learn, however imperfectly, China in all its complexity and contradictions and dynamism and depth, will reward you many times over. Become fluent and literate if you can; stumble over grammar and mispronunciation if you must – only, connect.

I know the mid-life, mid-career 'I've got work to do' conundrum, because I lived that, myself. When NPR decided to send me to Beijing in the mid-'90s to open its first official bureau, my foreign editor gave me a summer to learn Chinese. I was still living in my dorm room when I had to shift gears and start covering the UN Women's Conference, in Beijing, and for the next four years, the pace rarely slowed down. That made me that much more grateful that I'd had that summer to get the basics down, to be drilled relentlessly on tones, and to get a big enough vocabulary and a firm enough grasp of the grammar that I could build on it whenever I had time.

Once you have the basic foundation, anyone can be your teacher, from a village farmer-turned-housekeeper to the Beijing cab driver who speaks like he's got a mouthful of marbles to the older guy in the park at dawn who writes beautiful calligraphy with a giant brush in water on the pavement, and tells you stories about old Beijing as his characters slowly evaporate. Once I realized, early in my stay in Beijing, how generous and tolerant Chinese people can be with foreigners who speak bad Chinese -- more, I think, than many Americans are with foreigners who speak bad English -- I grew more adventurous and less self-conscious about venturing out and seeing who I would meet. I grew to understand China better each time I did.

Let me back up, to before I ever started thinking about a life in China.

I studied European history as an undergraduate, wrote a thesis about Ethiopia as a graduate student, and based myself in Southeast Asia when, at age 27, I began working as a freelance foreign correspondent. Over the next seven years, I traveled regularly through seven countries, covering forgotten wars and refugees in Burma and Cambodia, aspiration and isolation in Vietnam, repression under Suharto in Indonesia, ambition under Mahathir in Malaysia and Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore and sleepy socialism in Laos.

I learned some Thai, a little Khmer a few words of Vietnamese and Burmese. My high school French came in handy when talking to older Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians, who'd picked up the language when these were still French colonies. But I didn't even think of trying to become fluent in every language in every country where I reported. Burma alone had more than 100 different languages. Instead, I learned to find good interpreters, and to pay attention not just to what was said, but to how it was said, in what context, with what body language. I listened, too, for what was not said. It was a little like someone with bad hearing or eyesight compensating by sharpening other senses.

If you'd asked me before I set out, I would have said that, of course, I saw myself eventually speaking like a native, getting beneath the surface of the culture, understanding the nuances. Once in Bangkok, I saw myself scrambling to write for five different media outlets, so I could make enough to pay my rent. I found the work satisfying in many ways, but it was a constant scramble. Eventually, I grew restless, and started thinking about what might come next.

And it was around then, in a lull between trips to war zones and refugee camps, on a tropical evening in Bangkok, that I learned my first Chinese characters.

A friend was telling me about his language studies in Sichuan. I remarked that it must be hard to learn such a different writing system. He pulled out a pen and notebook, and drew what looked like a curved stick man. "This is the character for person," he said. He drew a line through the stick man's waist. "And this is the character for 'big.'" And then another line went on top. "And this is the character for 'sky' or 'heavens.'" Not so hard, huh?"

I was charmed, but I was an easy mark. Chinese characters had long had aesthetic appeal for me. As a college student, I'd worn a tank top picked up in Chicago's Chinatown, with characters that said – Serve the People? Zhou's Laundry? No idea. I just liked wearing it. This wasn't orientalism or cultural appropriation. I saw power and beauty in those characters, expressions of an ancient culture that some of my friends and fellow classmates, in the early '80s, were beginning to explore on the ground in China. I didn't see myself there yet, but China had already caught my attention.

By the time I learned those first Chinese characters a decade later, I'd already spent three years reporting in Southeast Asia and seeing how the influence of Chinese culture had permeated like water through the cracks of local cultures. I was drawn to learn more about China, and to learn it directly, rather than through the reflected impressions of a region with a long, complicated and, most recently at that time, troubled relationship with its big neighbor to the north.

Memories then were still fresh of the upheaval caused by communist insurgencies in most Southeast Asian countries, funded and supported by Beijing; indeed, the Malaysian communist insurgency had wound down in 1989,, Burma's a year before that, and well into the '90s, Cambodia's Khmer Rouge were still getting covert military aid from China. Indonesia was living with suppressed memories of the bloody 1965 crackdown on the Communist insurgency there that left half a million people dead, many of them ethnic Chinese whose families had lived in Indonesia for generations. In Vietnam, Communist leaders who once had comradely feelings toward their Chinese counterparts were becoming wary and resentful, especially as China started flexing its muscles in the contested South China Sea. At Johnson Reef in 1988, Chinese naval frigates sank two Vietnamese ships and killed 64 Vietnamese sailors to secure its first six holdings in the Spratly Islands.

“China and Vietnam are as close as lips and teeth,” Vietnam’s Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach told me at the time, with a smile not quite masking an edge of bitterness. “But sometimes teeth bite lips.”

So as I was learning those first characters, China, in the minds of many Southeast Asians, still loomed as a shadow over the region, provoking anxiety and distrust. The Tiananmen crackdown hadn’t helped.

But something was also changing. China was cracking open its door, becoming less ideological, and beckoning the huge Chinese diaspora of Southeast Asia and beyond to come in, reconnect with their ancestral homeland, and make some money. Explorations began, first tentative and then enthusiastic. I traveled through Southeast Asia, writing about this sea change for an NPR series on the region’s Chinese diaspora. I became ever more interested in getting to know China myself.

I’d already dipped a toe into those waters, at a time when they were decidedly chilly. In June 1989, on my way to China for the first time, I boarded my Beijing-bound flight in Bangkok with trepidation.

I was coming in on a transit visa, on my way to North Korea. Its embassy in Beijing had informed me I could pick up my visa there, but it would take a full week to process it.

Arriving in Beijing, I braced for the kind of luggage searches I’d experienced in Vietnam and Cambodia, the suspicious questions about my motives I’d faced in the Soviet Union. I fretted about all the journalist visas in my passport, and wondered if I’d be turned back at the Beijing airport. But, no; my passport was stamped and my bag delivered with impressive efficiency. Not for the last time in China, I felt a disorienting but liberating gap between the restrictions I’d expected and what I actually experienced.

On that first visit, I stayed in Beijing’s Jianguomenwai Diplomatic Compound, with a colleague who pointed out fresh bullet holes in the wall, from an armored personnel carrier shooting into the compound from the eastern Second Ring Road just days before. Below, surveillance cameras tracked the movements of Chinese and foreigners alike.

I borrowed a bicycle, and ventured out. The broad streets had few cars in the middle, but a solid river of cyclists on either side, most dressed in muted greys and blues, pedaling dusty dark bikes. I broke into the current, and started

pedaling, bracing for something bad to happen. If I didn't get stopped by police, I thought, I'd surely get knocked over in this close-packed cycling throng, and there was nowhere to fall.

But within the current, everything flowed. A collective sixth sense played out like jazz; intuitive improvisation, with everyone seeming to know what signals to send and how to react to them to keep flowing. We passed soldiers and police, but none stopped me. A few fellow cyclists ventured some pleasantries in English at stoplights, and once I was in a park, away from the crowd, a couple of people sought longer conversations 'to practice their English.' They talked about their families, their studies, their hopes to improve their English, maybe to go to America. Tiananmen was not mentioned directly, though there were mentions of how things here were not good. I wondered how our conversation would have been different if I could have spoken to them in Chinese. Perhaps the buffer afforded by English was, at that particular time, more boon than barrier.

I went on to North Korea, which was everything I might have expected from China in crackdown mode and more – constant surveillance, control and paranoia from officials, and fear in ordinary North Koreans about interacting with foreigners. Those designated to talk to me repeated the same cult-worship lines about the Great Leader and the Dear Leader. Back in Beijing, it felt relaxed by comparison. I knew a harsh crackdown was underway, but even at this epic low point in China's recent history, I was impressed with the decency and depth I'd seen in my limited encounters with ordinary people, and I knew I wanted to come back and get to know this place better.

Six years later, I persuaded my NPR foreign editor to let me open NPR's first bureau in Beijing. I lobbied for time to learn Chinese. I was given a summer.

Princeton in Beijing seemed the best possible choice, allowing me to cram a year's worth of college-level Chinese into a few weeks, and practice on the streets in the place where I'd be living. At age 33 that summer, I was the oldest student in the class. Many of the other students were either still in college or fresh out, used to working hard and playing hard and getting very little sleep. Our class of absolute beginners shared a dorm at the Beijing Music Academy near the northern 4th Ring Road. More advanced Princeton in Beijing students lived and studied at Beijing Normal University – a safe distance away from so as not to be contaminated by those of us who didn't yet know enough Chinese to be able to communicate only in Chinese, as our language pledge said we should.

On came the firehose of new concepts and characters, the daily brute memorization, the four hours of class and half an hour of drilling. I found the initial barrage overwhelming and exhausting, made no better by the fact that the two young guys whose dorm rooms were on either side of mine seemed to need half the sleep I did, and were often up into the wee hours playing their language tapes, after an evening out at local bars.

It's safe to say I was not the best student in the class. At times, my teachers seemed a little exasperated that exhortations like, 'this will count in your grade' didn't hold the same terror for me that they did for the younger students. When one teacher called on me to write characters on the board after I'd been out sick for three days, I said I couldn't do it. "What will you do as a journalist when you have an important document you need to read?," he chided. I was sleep-deprived and cranky. "Have my news assistant translate it," I replied testily. That drew chuckles from the class, and his ire. But it was also an accurate forecast of what would eventually happen. It wasn't that I didn't want to learn, just that time was limited, I was going to have to hit the journalistic ground running after two months of Chinese, and I was trying to be realistic about what I could do in the time I had.

In the midst of all this, I sought out changes of scenery beyond my dorm room desk. One afternoon, I chose to sit on a bench in a leafy park and practice writing characters. It took just minutes before curious passersby started slowing down, looking over my shoulder, and correcting my pathetic efforts. Conversations ensued, friendly, encouraging, and I left speaking more Chinese than I had when I sat down. I revisited the park more than once, with my character worksheets, that summer.

Every such conversation in Chinese, however imperfect – and they were all imperfect – made me appreciate the doors that can open when you show someone that you are making an effort to connect with them. I chatted to street vendors and shop owners. I shared train compartments and food and conversation. I struck up random conversations wherever I traveled and reported, first in my own rudimentary Chinese, and then with the help of my Chinese news assistant. I tried to get over my own self-consciousness about being far less articulate in this new language than I am in my own.

"I think that made people drop their guard," a Chinese friend and former news assistant told me, years after we'd worked together. "The fact that you were trying meant a lot. And the fact that your Chinese wasn't perfect almost made it

easier – people didn't feel threatened." I'd never thought of it that way. I feared I was trying people's patience.

But taxi drivers? Taxi drivers loved to chat. They had all the time in the world, or at least, all the time that you were sitting in their cab. And Beijing's taxi drivers back then were, in fact, great teachers, both of language and of local lore. Many were astute at quickly figuring out my level of language ability, chatting at that level and throwing in a few new words for good measure. By the end of my first summer in Beijing, I was hearing and at least half-understanding jokes about Premier Li Peng, and about how police were carrying blankets to throw around women they imagined would strip naked in protest at the UN Women's Conference. I found myself puzzling less over the language on that one, than about why Beijing's police thought that foreign women would, as a matter of course, strip naked to protest.

After a few dozen taxi chats, I began understanding and responding to the barrage of questions that would come as soon as I slipped into the front passenger seat and closed the door.

"What country are you from?"

"America."

"Ah, America. Americans are rich."

"Some Americans are rich. Others, not so much," I'd reply.

"How much do you make?"

"Not so much. I'm a journalist."

Some cab drivers would persist. I'd demur. Eventually, they'd move on to other questions.

"Where do you live? Do you rent or own? How much is your rent? How old are you? Are you married? You're not married? Why are you not married? You're a little old not to be married."

Later, when I was married, the questions went to, "Do you have children? Why don't you have children? Don't you like children?" Later still, I answered the "are

you married?" question with "I'm divorced." In the late '90s, that stopped people in their tracks. They'd look stricken. They didn't know what to say.

But at least divorce was good for something. It got us talking about relationships, marriage and children, about where our cultures differed and where they overlapped. In gridlocked traffic, with lots of time to kill, my ability to speak conversational Chinese opened up this space for personal stories and reflections that may never have come out in a formal interview that involved speaking into a microphone. All this was invaluable to my understanding of what mattered to at least a few Chinese people, and why, and what level of confusion or resistance or liberation they were feeling about the era of rapid social change through which they were living.

Before I share yet another cab driver story, reinforcing the stereotype that foreign journalists just talk to cab drivers, (a) I didn't exclusively talk to cab drivers and (b) if I hadn't talked to cab drivers when I was in China, that would have added up to a lot of wasted hours in cabs over the years, when I could have been talking to cab drivers. In hundreds if not thousands of cabs and conversations, in cities and towns throughout China over many years, I grew to appreciate how China's taxi drivers are rolling repositories of local culture. With almost every new passenger, they pick up new jokes, stories and gossip, news and opinion. I'd leave, wanting to check the facts, but appreciative of the glimpse this gave me into local life.

So – here's another taxi driver story. It was May 8, 1999, the day after NATO planes with US pilots bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese journalists. Huge crowds of demonstrators had marched past my office building on the southern edge of Ritan Park, to throw bricks and bags of urine and Molotov cocktails at the US embassy, where the US ambassador was holed up, and at the British embassy, and at the Albanian embassy, which really confused the Albanians, who thought the Chinese were their friends.

It was a day when I'd seen an ugly side of Chinese nationalism. American journalists had been beaten and jostled, and one was punched in the face. The night before, I'd been out on the street doing interviews, when an angry young man started shouting at me, and a crowd gathered, hemming me in. "What's he saying?" I murmured to my assistant. Her face blanched. "Uh, he's saying, 'repay blood debts with blood.'" Others in the crowd were cheering along. I knew I had to change the dynamic.

I started to speak to the angry young man directly, in my imperfect Chinese. I said I didn't know what had happened or why, but I was sorry for the Chinese lives that had been lost. I said I could understand why he was angry. I tried to transform myself, in his eyes, from a faceless enemy to a human being. Another young man in the crowd put a hand on the other guy's shoulder and said, 'She's not the problem.' I shot him a grateful look. I could feel the crowd relax. They let me go.

The next day, I was out on the streets again, and saw other Western journalists harassed and hit. My deadline was looming, so I slipped down a side street to Xindong Lu, where I put up my hand, hailed a cab, and in a matter of seconds, sat down in sweet silence and air conditioned comfort.

"Were you at the US embassy?" the cabdriver asked.

"Yeah, I'm a journalist," I said, bracing for vitriol.

He glanced at me.

"American?"

"Yeah."

He drove, eyes forward, for a moment. "Well, governments do what they do. We're just ordinary people." We had an interesting conversation. I was able to get home safely, file my story, wash up and nap after a sleepless night, and be grateful for the driver's grounded pragmatism and decency. If the Chinese government could bottle that and sell it, it would solve their soft power problems.

At the end of that summer, I left China for three years, and by the time I came back, it was a different place. More Chinese were traveling and studying abroad, seeing foreign films and television programs and getting online. Sprawling shopping malls replaced outdoor markets, and status-conscious shoppers snapped up trendy foreign brands, or reasonable facsimiles thereof. Economic growth was at full throttle, and so was national confidence. China had thrown aside former leader Deng Xiaoping's advice to hide its strength and bide its time. It was now actively aspiring to become a global leader.

In casual conversations, fewer people wanted to know about my personal life and finances, and had more to say about what was happening in China, for better and for worse. The word “suzhi” kept coming up. I asked Chinese friends what it meant, and kept getting different answers -inner essence, learning, cultivation, civility, sophistication. The opposite of having suzhi was being vulgar. It felt like a big part of the gap between what Chinese wanted their country to be and what it still was could be defined by suzhi. When fights broke out on the street, when officials behaved badly, when a new food scandal erupted into the local press, people would shake their heads and say ‘women.de suzhi, tai di.’ Our suzhi is too low.

At the same time, a younger generation was seeing new possibilities for itself, in relationships, in work, in life. More people seemed to feel comfortable sharing opinions, including political opinions, with a foreign journalist, and even more felt comfortable, even enthusiastic, about sharing those opinions online. I was grateful that the limited Chinese I had allowed me to tap into some of this phenomenon, and even more grateful for a succession of smart and resourceful young news assistants, who helped fill in the rest, and educated me on how they and their peers were viewing things different than had those “a generation older” – and by that, in this time of rapid change, they meant three to five years older.

Demonstrations mounted around the country, pushing back against environmental hazards, and against local officials destroying homes, seizing land and offering it to developers. The wariness people displayed in the the previous decade gave way, as a generation that hadn’t known political fear began to push for more space, sometimes gaining ground, sometimes being knocked back.

An outspoken and often wounded national pride, informed by the Patriotic Education Curriculum that had been imposed shortly after the Tiananmen crackdown, also began to emerge in my conversations. A set-piece during my taxi rides, in the years immediately after my return, went something like this:

Driver: “You Americans are too aggressive. Why do you keep invading places. Why are you in Iraq?”

Me: “Good question. I don’t know.”

Driver: “You shouldn’t be in Iraq.”

Me: "I agree."

Driver: "But you're American."

Me: "We Americans sometimes disagree with our government."

Driver: (Looking skeptical) You can do that?

From there, the conversation could take off in any number of directions. The ice was broken. Sometimes it veered back to the personal, sometimes it stayed on the political, or a combination of both. Without speaking the Chinese I did, however imperfectly, I never would have had the chance to banter and debate, to hear how much people thought for themselves, and when they fell back on the stock phrases and tropes served up by state-run media.

When the subject was personal, many people were remarkably candid, and that included talking about local government corruption and injustice. When it was political in a way that tapped the vein of growing nationalism, person after person said much the same thing, in much the same way. The indignant reaction to foreign coverage of the Tibetan uprising in 2008, and the foreign protests during China's Olympic torch relay that same year, come to mind.

And so, over the first decade of this century, these two strands grew, nationalism in one strand, and in the other – outspoken pluralism, in the form of demonstrations, and online comments, critiques and satire. A nascent civil society was taking shape, and for awhile, the government more or less tolerated it. It was a great time to be a journalist in China, made better by the Foreign Ministry relaxing, then getting rid of, regulations requiring official permission to interview just about anyone, regulations that few foreign correspondents were following, by that point, anyway.

Some Chinese journalists were doing increasingly impressive investigative work, too, great for the general Chinese readership, and a valuable resource for foreign correspondents. It wasn't that the censors had given up. They just couldn't seem to keep up with so much information coming from so many different places, from citizen journalists and bloggers and Weibo users, with sly coded language, a population that wanted to be heard and taken seriously.

And if the censors couldn't keep up with all the different, dissonant opinions that were then on public display in China, neither could foreign correspondents. But it

was fun trying. The better your language skills, the easier it was to explore all that was out there, but no one was going to get to all of it. Having a great Chinese researcher helped, as did the growing number of blogs and websites that scanned and translated Chinese social media.

It probably wasn't surprising that the Communist Party grew uncomfortable enough with this trend to feel an existential threat, and to start to push back. In the midst of the Arab Spring and the Jasmine Revolution of 2011, an anonymous online call for Chinese to take to the streets led only a brave few to venture out, and be promptly detained, but provided an excuse for Chinese officials to tighten up control, with tighter censorship online and of local journalists, and warnings to foreign correspondents that said, effectively, report what the government doesn't want you reporting, and risk getting kicked out. A few foreign correspondents have been.

Now that Xi Jinping's government is working to mute the spaces where public commentary and debate once flourished, it's an open question whether a generation that grew up in a relatively permissive, stable and prosperous era will accept these restrictions over the long term, and whether they'll have a choice. China is always interesting, but now for different reasons. For foreign correspondents now in China, at a time when their news assistants are regularly questioned by the Public Security Bureau, and Chinese journalists are warned to steer clear of their foreign counterparts, speaking and reading as much Chinese as possible is an even more valuable professional asset.

But it's still not a binary equation. In learning to understand China, every little bit counts -- the sleepless nights in smoky hard seat train compartments, the chats in fields with farmers and in city bars with young entrepreneurs about dreams and anxieties and about how power is displayed, used and abused. You don't have to be fluent in Chinese to understand what it means when a black Audi sideswipes a cyclist, and doesn't even slow down.

It is, of course, always better if you're fluent in the language of the place you're covering. But if you don't have time to become fluent, don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

Even with fluent Mandarin, you'll still be speaking to many people in China in their second language. I've reported in 40 countries, several of which have several languages. An argument can be made for learning any and all of them, but a more realistic argument can be made for doing the best you can with the

time you have, because if foreign correspondents only reported from countries in which they spoke all the local languages fluently, there'd be even less reporting from foreign correspondents, and we'd all be the poorer for it. You might say, 'so what? Why not just have local people report what's happening where they live?' That's beginning to happen, thanks to websites like *Global Voices*, and that's a valuable addition. But there's room both for local perspectives and for those of outsiders, who might see things locals take for granted, or overlook or, in a climate of censorship, are afraid to say.

At their best, foreign correspondents are observant, open, quick studies. The good ones learn what they can of the local language and culture in the time they have, whether a week or a month or five years, and fill in the gaps with a good interpreter, lots of background reading and interviews, and a truckload of humility. Journalists write the first draft of history, and offer glimpses of life as it's lived in places where many readers, listeners and viewers are unlikely to visit, and even if they do, unlikely to delve as deeply into certain aspects and issues. We are not academics, but we are grateful for what academics do, because we learn from them. And those of us who get to know a place well enough, and stay long enough, might just have something to offer in return.

I've had more than one regret that I never took a year off and studied Chinese. Long days and nights, dealing with editors on the other side of the world, and a reporting travel schedule that regularly took me out of China, was not the ideal situation for accelerated learning. But I did find, over my years in China, that every time I looped back around to review and build on the Chinese I had, it became a little easier and a little more fun, and the rewards were immediate.

Have I missed out because I haven't read modern Chinese novels and ancient Chinese classics in their original language? Absolutely. But there's still time. I've come to accept that learning Chinese, like learning about China, will, for me, be a life-long work-in-progress, one in which there is always more to know, and more worth knowing.

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