

## *Two Retired Academics: A Progress Report of Works in Progress*

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### **Abstract**

Two Hong Kong professors reveal how their understanding of the term “retirement” has taken on an unexpected, meaningful, and rewarding definition.

Allow us to introduce ourselves. Having both taught at Texas A&M University for many years, John and Gwendolyn came to Hong Kong in 1993. John began his academic post in the Communication Studies Department at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), with Gwen starting work at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) in 1994, first as a Visiting Scholar in the English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) and later as a professor in the Department of English. John retired in 2013 and Gwen in 2015, choosing to remain in the city and nearby the universities they had devoted the lion's share of their professional lives to.

Residing close to HKBU and CUHK has provided many opportunities to keep in touch with former students and colleagues. Inevitably, they are curious to know what retirement is like, always beginning with the big enigmatic question: What are you two doing nowadays? Our initial response corresponds to their expectations. We travel to new destinations, and we see family and friends overseas whether or not there is a special occasion requiring us to visit.

In addition, we have continued to contribute to our academic community, here and abroad. For example, John has made presentations at academic conferences, taught a linguistics course at a sister institution, served as a course consultant for a Guangzhou university, and been a freelance researcher and writer for HKBU. And in 2018,

John was conferred the Professor Emeritus title by HKBU.

Like John, Gwen has continued to make presentations and has also maintained connections with institutions in her roles as a book and journal manuscript reviewer, external examiner, program and personnel reviewer, as well as internal and external validation panelist. She has served on the Board of Directors for the Hans Andersen Club (HAC), a Hong Kong non-profit charity that provides support for underprivileged children and families and that she previously chaired for nine years. Upon her retirement from CUHK, Gwen received the Inaugural Distinguished Alumni Award from her high school academy, was named a Senior College Tutor for Shaw College, and was awarded a 2016 Shaw Outstanding Teaching Award.

But what else do we do in retirement? Here is where the definition of “retirement” requires expanding. We have continued to do research and writing and more. John has published the second edition of his book, *Public Speaking: The Lively Art*, as well as a handbook chapter “Discursive Dimensions of Deceptive Communication: A Framework for Practical Analysis” (2019). Gwen and long-time co-author Sam Dragga have published “Dangerous Neighbors: Erasive Rhetoric and Communities at Risk,” an essay that won the 2016 Technical and Scientific Communication Award in the category of “Best Article Reporting Historical Research or Textual Studies in Technical and Scientific Communication.”

Moreover, in retirement, we have now gone beyond these traditional research publications. With our daughter, Devereux Gong Powers, we published *Mississippi Delta Chinese Veterans: A Delta Tribute* (2018). In this book, we identify 182 Mississippi Delta Chinese veterans of World War II (WWII), featuring twenty-four interviews of surviving servicemen, so that our readers—local, state, national, and international—can appreciate the wide-ranging nature of their military service to America during that global conflict. Published

during the seventieth anniversary of the end of WWII, the book reveals how these veterans of Chinese ancestry fulfilled their responsibility in the American military with honor and duty in many different ways. After the war, most of them maintained a dignified silence about their having been in WWII. In spite of their reticence to talk about their contributions, their wartime participation was a key factor in moving the Mississippi Delta Chinese community forward, not only for themselves but also for their children and the future generations beyond. The publication of this research has allowed our family formal and informal opportunities to talk about our methodology, research of military history and records, as well as this community of Chinese veterans' migration to America.

Given the interest in our research on the Mississippi Delta WWII veterans of Chinese ancestry, we subsequently directed our efforts from "page" to "production." The result was *Honor and Duty: The Mississippi Delta Chinese, A Three-Part Documentary Series*. We had never produced a film, so this documentary enabled us to learn-on-the-job, forming a production company, and taking on the roles of executive producers, script-writers/consultants, and public relations/community go-betweens. The documentary premiered on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in Jackson, Mississippi, in May 2016, and was followed by forty screenings and post-show forums in a variety of settings: museums, universities, community centers, churches, schools, libraries, US government departments, theaters, housing complexes, historical societies, and cultural centers. Along with the screenings and discussions, we had interviews with American and Chinese outlets, i.e., radio, TV, and newspapers.

In concert with the collective efforts by various Chinese-American organizations and Asian congressional leaders, our book and documentary have had significant impact in the US. Most notably, the US Congress passed the "Chinese-American World War II Veteran Congressional Gold Medal Act," a bill that

officially recognizes and honors these veterans' military service and contributions to America. President Donald J. Trump formally signed the legislation in Washington, DC, on December 20, 2018.

But what now? At this juncture, we could pen a conclusion or summary. However, because this is a progress report on our retirement, it is fitting to forecast our "research and writing in progress," followed by some insights we would like to share as we reflect upon our experience as retired academics to date.

Currently, John is working on three book projects: Principles of Human Communication: A Tier-Based Introduction; Rhetorical Criticism of Public Communication, Discursive and Presentational Dimensions; and Toward a New Paradigm for the Human Sciences: A User's Guide to Susanne Langer's Philosophy of Mind.

Gwen is busy editing *Sit Sun Yuen on The Essentials of Life*, the translations of her maternal grandfather's two monographs, one on religion and another on China's national economy and people's livelihood. She also continues to write *In My Daddy's Store*, a collection of creative nonfiction essays about her experience of being Chinese and growing up in the Mississippi Delta; through the narratives, the complex linguistic, cultural, educational, social, and economic dynamics of the American South's white, black, and Chinese people are presented.

Even now we cannot resist the "dance of collaborators" and have begun research on *The Dunn WWII Letters: A Mississippi Delta Story of War, Love, and Family*. We are analyzing a collection of approximately 650 English and Chinese letters written between a Mississippi Delta Chinese WWII soldier and his wife.

We began this progress report with the oft-asked query: What are you two doing nowadays? As two retired academics, we hope our individual and collaborative exploits yield a peek into how we are expanding the meaning of "retirement" for ourselves. We are learning how research and writing outside the conventional

confines of academia frees us to give ourselves permission to take up a rich array of projects—research (1) that we were previously too pressed for time to pursue, (2) that was perhaps perceived to be personally meaningful but somewhat peripheral to our traditional job descriptions, and (3) that encouraged us to explore and develop expertise in new media, creative arts, and literary genres. We have found our understanding of the term “retirement” can lead to renewal, excitement, and passion for ideas we have had hidden away in our desk drawers or recessed in our minds, just waiting to be liberated.

As we take stock of where our retirement journey has taken us so far, we realize so many contrasts in our perceptions of “time” and ourselves. Our “old eyes” see more clearly some important understanding of ideas we always thought but were reticent to say aloud. For example, when we were in our university workplaces, we felt the pressure “time” exerted on our colleagues and ourselves, both internally and externally. By organizational design—intentional or not, various levels of research and grant performance reviews (e.g., the University Grants Committee (UGC), the Research Grants Council (RGC), university, faculty, and departmental evaluations) contributed to making “time” an enemy, often resulting in book or research projects requiring greater scope being put on hold or scrapped altogether in favor of quick turnaround “deliverables,” works yielding favorable “investment returns.” Deadlines for annual reviews, contract extensions, substantiation, title changes, or promotions dictated the need for expediency.

But what was sacrificed? For us, pursuing intrinsically valuable projects and developing new areas of expertise were delayed. Only in retirement have we actively focused on research and publications that fulfill personal and professional aspirations we have held for most of our lives as professors. But, as we now have realized, “time” can subtract from a life, but it can also add to life, too.

In our case, “time” is now allowing us the freedom to achieve so many “left-behind” research and writing projects and abilities, all already identified in the paragraphs above. We have come to know that, just because we have retired and have no academic workplace that imposes structure for daily life and expectations, we can continue to live and think and share our ideas as independent scholars without boundaries. “Time” allows us the luxury of proceeding at our own pace, whether it be in frenetic pursuit, leisurely engagement, or somewhere in-between: the choice is ours. This is our discovery about being retired academics in Hong Kong. Leaving academia and being retirees are not the end of “time” for us.

As promised, this essay is a report on our “work in progress” after life at our Hong Kong universities. More importantly, it reveals our realization and celebration at being “works in progress” ourselves.

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