INTRODUCTION

PERRY LINK

Few in today's globally connected world would disagree that we must understand other cultures better and that learning languages is an excellent way to do so. Yet many, especially in the largely monolingual United States, still do not realize how important the perspective of a different language can be and how far the effects of learning a language can reach.

Surveys show that about 75 percent of Americans speak only one language. This contrasts with only six percent in Sweden and the Netherlands. More than half of Europe as a whole speaks a second language, and about 25 percent of Europeans speak a third. In China, children routinely learn Mandarin in addition to their local language, and many also begin English in school. Today about 200,000 American students are studying Chinese, while about 200,000,000 Chinese are studying English.

English is, of course, sufficiently widespread that it can get one through almost any airport in the world and past the check-in desk at many hotels. Perhaps the English-speaker doesn't need second languages? For the completion of simple tasks, perhaps not. But in order to understand the lives and thoughts of other people in more than a superficial way, and to carry out complex tasks with them, knowing their language has major advantages that a monolingual person will not be able to access, or in many cases even be aware of. A second language can, moreover, benefit a person even when communication is not at stake; especially when languages are very different, as Chinese and English are, one's mind is stretched and made more flexible just by seeing that thoughts about life can be conceived using different tools.

The 10 essays in this book are meant to show the variety of ways in which learning Chinese as a second language can reward a person. All the authors learned Chinese and then went on to distinguished careers in journalism, academia, government service, or the business world. At the heart of each essay is the question, "What difference did learning Chinese make in my career?" The essayists are people who learned Chinese much better than most second-language learners do, which makes them well-positioned to bring precision and insight to the question of what difference learning Chinese has made in their lives.

American students who begin the study of Chinese usually have their dreams: to make money in the China market; to understand a distant and perhaps exotic culture; to serve their

country as a diplomat; or, in the case of Chinese-Americans, to bolster a Chinese identity or be able to talk with Granny. For some, the motivation is just to be the coolest guy in the dorm by taking a language everyone sees as "hard." There is an important difference between studying these motives and reading the essays in this book, though, because students' dreams are projections into the future, whereas the essays in this book are by richly experienced people looking back on what has actually happened.

Our 10 essays, despite their variety, converge on some important points: that speaking Chinese leads much more quickly to deeper trust with Chinese people than can be had through speaking English or by using interpreters; that avoiding interpreters brings not only better precision but a valuable sense of immediacy; that thinking "inside" the Chinese language in some ways offers different ways to understand the world; and that learning Chinese can enrich one's life in ways one could not have anticipated. The details of these advantages can vary, though, depending on who one is and what one is trying to do.

Several of the essayists, before agreeing to write, pointed out a subtle presumption in the question of what difference "knowing Chinese" made to them. It is such a rich, ancient, and varied language—not really a language so much as a set of related languages—that no one can ever claim to "know" it. The only honest answer one can give to the question, "How many years did it take you to learn Chinese?" is "I don't know; I'm still on my way." Mark Twain, who had a special fascination with China, is said to have observed that Chinese is not a

dead language but *should* be, since only the dead have enough time to learn it.

A number of the essays analyze the dangers of relying on interpreters. Really good interpreters are, first of all, hard to find, and even the good ones have trouble being detailed and accurate under time pressure. Donald Clarke, a distinguished legal scholar, notes in his essay that a specialist in Chinese law will know the important difference between a *fayuan* (court) and a *fating* (tribunal) even though, in lay language, the two are synonymous. Only a very rare interpreter would be aware of the distinction. Interpreters also—through no fault of their own, because it is inevitable—slow down interchanges and introduce formality, and in these ways in a sense become barriers as well as bridges in communication.

Ian Johnson, who writes for *The New York Times* and *The New York Review of Books*, observes in his essay that getting under the surface of another culture requires more—and in the end yields much more—than word-for-word substitutions between two languages can ever generate. "Facts and straight-ahead news articles are important," he writes, "but to really understand other cultures we need more...[we need] the rhythms of people's interior monologues, and the hopes and aspirations that lie beneath the surface of daily events." Normally it is impossible to get such things through interpreters.

Julia Andrews, a leading authority on modern Chinese art, notes that a special advantage of not using an interpreter is convenience in highlighting topics on which a person needs to know more. In her oral interviews, she recalls:

> I often failed to understand the name of an organization or bureaucratic procedure, or would not recognize the name of a person. I would ask how to write a term or a name in characters, and my obvious ignorance sometimes led to a long explanation of what the thing was and how it worked, or who the person was. These mini-lectures could lead to interesting new tangents. If an interpreter had come between me and my conversation partners, my incomprehension of certain terms would not have triggered those rich mini-lectures and the new tangents would have remained submerged.

Andrews presents herself here as open, respectful of the culture of her interlocutors, self-deprecatingly "ignorant," and eager to learn from them. She and others in this book observe how this approach works much better if one is speaking Chinese. The direct, warm feeling and sense of accessibility that she can generate would not happen if she were speaking English and using an interpreter.

Geoffrey Ziebart, a retired president for China at the Crane Company, was often involved in negotiations in China involving many millions of dollars. He explains in his essay how trust could be built not only because he spoke Chinese but also because he could easily insert humor into tense situations. Humor does not translate well. It had to be done in Chinese.

Chinese people often feel flattered when a foreigner, especially a Westerner, can say things in their language. If the foreigner speaks well, that is better, but even clumsy efforts are welcome. Simply that the foreigner cares enough to try shows goodwill. A bumbling effort can deflate the fear, which some Chinese have, that the foreigner thinks he or she enters

the relationship in a superior position. A joke that circulates among American graduate students in China studies tells of two cows, a Chinese cow and an American cow, munching grass in a field. The American cow raises its head and emits a M-M-A-A-A-A-U-U-U-W-W!!! The Chinese cow raises its head and says, "Hey—your Chinese is great!"

Chinese-American students sometimes complain, with justice, that because they look Chinese physically, they do not get the same kind of congratulations. You might be born and raised in Illinois, as was Melinda Liu, the founding Beijing correspondent for *Newsweek*, who contributes an essay in this book; but if you look Chinese, as Liu does, people in China often expect you to sound Chinese, too. In this case a bumbling performance counts against you; it raises the question of whether you have adequately maintained Chineseness.

Liu also takes note of an interesting counter-current. In situations where political sensitivities are in the air, Chinese people sometimes want the buffer that a language barrier can provide. She observes that "some Chinese Foreign Ministry authorities fluent in English purposely [would speak] in Chinese on official occasions, patiently waiting as interpreters did their thing…they *wanted* the distance that comes from using an interpreter." Peter Hessler, a correspondent for *The New Yorker* who spent two years teaching English in a small city in Sichuan Province, notes in his essay:

> [O]ver time, I realized that my study of Chinese was almost a political act. The authorities didn't want me to learn it: they had

> made it difficult to find tutors, and they often warned us against going into the city alone. They had established ways of monitoring and controlling every potential relationship that I might have in English. In Chinese, though, I was free.

If learning Chinese helps one to understand how other people view the world, with time the effect can be that even one's own habits in seeing the world are different. Bill Bikales—who had two China careers, the first in the travel business and the second in U.N. work—speculates in his essay that one long-term effect of learning Chinese has been to gain a general mental flexibility that he did not have before. After he worked for eight years in Mongolia, a prominent Mongolian credited him with "thinking like a Mongolian." Bikales observes:

> [I] believe that my study of Chinese is part of what made me that way. Mongolian is not Chinese; I am not speaking here about benefiting from linguistic cognates. But I think that studying Chinese helped me to break out of the tinted glass box of English language and American thought constructions.

In my own essay, I write about some differences in the "conceptual metaphors" that are embedded in the Chinese and English languages, and speculate that the famous "mind-body" problem in Western philosophy might, to a certain extent, be only an artifact of language use.

Many of the essays show, in one way or another, that answers to the question, "What difference did learning Chinese make?" can have a charming unpredictability. James Hargett explains how he, a working-class kid from Brooklyn, after a

series of amusing accidents, ended as a distinguished scholar of Chinese poetry. He calls his essay "My Debt to Sheer Chance." Thomas Gorman's equally sprightly essay tells how, in 1974, he set out hitchhiking to Vancouver in order to take a cheap flight to Hong Kong, where he arrived with only $150 in his pocket. Twenty-one years later, he was president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong.

A recurring theme among the essays is that Chinese culture, through language, tends to envelop a person. People who began their study of Chinese with one or another specific goal in mind, find in the end that they have been consumed, even entranced. Whatever specific goal motivated them at first eventually dissolves into the larger Chinese world, and that world—its loves and joys, its stings and frustrations, in any case its incapability of being boring—takes over.