

...it is only by knowing the language that we can effectively enter people's lives—their **myths** and **histories**, their **interior lives** and **dreams**.



IAN JOHNSON

**A MANIFESTO  
FOR A NEW  
FOREIGN REPORTING**

Ian Johnson, who writes regularly from Beijing for *The New York Times* and *The New York Review of Books*, is the author of books and articles on religion, popular culture, and daily life in China. He is devoted to revealing the China that lies beyond places Westerners normally go and argues, in this essay, that language is indispensable in that effort.

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I grew up in Montreal, which is part of the French-speaking province of Quebec. My mother tongue is English, so this put me in the Anglophone minority, which makes up about 20 percent of the province's population. In my parents' generation, Anglophones often did not speak French beyond *merci* and *au revoir*. They lived in English-speaking enclaves, and when they ventured into society they expected others to speak English—a kind of linguistic apartheid that reflected the fact that it was the English who had conquered the French, moving in to take many of the key economic positions in society. That was in the 18th century, but even 200 years later the Anglophones of Quebec were only a wee bit embarrassed that they hadn't learned to *parlez-vous*. After all, the women behind the shop counters could all speak a bit of English. And if they didn't, then they should—and in some cases were forced to.

### **The Ugly Anglophone**

By the time I entered elementary school in the late 1960s, this arrogance was ending thanks to Quebecers' own civil rights movement, something known as the Quiet Revolution.

Francophones began to ascend to positions of power and Anglophones realized they had to learn the local language or leave. I was among the first generation of pupils to attend French immersion classes, where we spoke nothing but French, even in the playground. This was part of a change in attitudes—a litmus test toward language. Many people realized that learning French was the right thing to do and would be necessary in the future. Some couldn't accept the new times. Many simply upped and left. This was the case with some of my family members, who wanted nothing to do with a Quebec where they had to speak French. As one aunt told me, only half-jokingly: “the French became uppity.”

These experiences had a lasting impact on me when I went to college. Most narrowly, I decided I did not want to learn another European language: been there, done that. So I picked a language as different from my own as I could imagine: Chinese. More broadly, those experiences made me look at language as inextricably linked to how well a person can understand and be part of a society. I knew that when I went abroad—and I really wanted to travel—I didn't want to be one of the ugly Anglophones I knew from my childhood. I wanted to engage with people directly and learn from them about their lives. I also began to sense that knowing other people's languages wasn't just a nice thing to do, or smart for one's career prospects, but a moral imperative.

After studying Chinese for a couple of years and working at the school newspaper, I went to China in 1984. I learned Chinese through a language program at Peking University,

and also did research for my senior thesis on North American journalism in China. I interviewed a dozen correspondents from various newspapers and wire services. One of the key points I wanted to figure out was how many spoke Chinese. A few did, such as John F. Burns of *The New York Times*, but I was surprised to find that most didn't. Newspapers rotated journalists through assignments like diplomats through foreign postings. Speaking the local language was a bonus, but not a necessity.

During my research I also noticed something else: that most of the journalists copied each other's stories. You'd see a profile of the same *getihu*,<sup>1</sup> the same farmer, and the same acrobat. These were subjects often culled from *China Daily* or in each other's reports, and regurgitated. The articles weren't bad or wrong, but they were limited and derivative. This wasn't surprising because the correspondents lived like the Anglophone Quebeckers in a foreign ghetto. Part of it was due to the government, which forced most foreigners to live inside "diplomatic compounds"—guarded ghettos built to keep foreigners in one place and easily watched. But that was only one part of the problem. More importantly, they were stuck in a mental ghetto of people only able to guess at what Chinese were thinking. They had to hope that their staff and the rumors picked up at dinner parties were enough to get them through another week, another month, another year.

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1 *Getihu* (個體戶) is a term for individual entrepreneurs who were allowed to operate as part of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms.

This is one reason why so many back then just stayed two or three years; it was mentally exhausting to live in such an isolated world.

What I've also come to realize over the past few decades is that the situation hasn't changed as much as one might think. Most correspondents hardly speak Chinese and cannot read it with any fluency. Most live in a ghetto—now, not the geographic one of foreign compounds but the virtual one of Twitter and news aggregation sites. If journalists are like a country's sensory perceptions, that means we are partially blind or deaf to China's reality.

### **A Thought Experiment**

Imagine a Chinese journalist based in Washington or New York or Los Angeles who didn't know English. This person was highly intelligent and had several smart young staffers fluent in Chinese and English. But our middle-aged hack from Hangzhou was functionally illiterate. She couldn't speak or understand much beyond ordering a Chardonnay, talking to a taxi driver, and exchanging a few pleasantries at the start of an interview. That would mean she couldn't meaningfully read *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, couldn't watch *NewsHour* or *The O'Reilly Factor*, couldn't listen to *All Things Considered* or Rush Limbaugh, wasn't able to read *Politico* or Breitbart, had no way to speak directly with an Appalachian farmer or a tassel-loafed lobbyist, had never really understood a word sung by Bob Dylan or Cole Porter, couldn't