

Introduction:

In the country of the blind, one eye is king

Knowledge of the Chinese language and culture has an enormous impact on cooperation with China. Decent knowledge about China is an absolute must in order to work efficiently there and to achieve good and fruitful communication. To communicate efficiently it is necessary to gain insight into Chinese cultural preferences and sensitivities. This means one needs to understand both the culture and language.

The Chinese language attracted enormous interest after the 1978 Reform introduced by Deng Xiaoping. Today, more and more people deal with China and more and more people ask questions about the impact the Chinese language has on cooperation with China. “Is learning Chinese really that difficult?” is what we often hear. Since Chinese differs so much from western languages it is surrounded with a kind of mystique. This is a perception more than anything else, and it makes the language unnecessarily distant.

It is true that you may say ‘horse’ instead of ‘mother’ if your tonal pronunciation is wrong. Because *ma* pronounced in one tone means ‘horse’ while in another tone it means ‘mother’. Chinese is a tonal language. For people who grew up in a language environment without tones, this takes some getting used to. In tonal languages, the meaning of a word or character is connected to the tone. Different pronunciations result in different meanings. This is one of the difficulties of the Chinese language. Another is the exotic Chinese script. This looks like little drawings that seem impossible to decipher. How does one succeed in learning to read them?

Westerners who speak and write Chinese are often ascribed a kind of exclusivity in their milieu, while everyone finds it absolutely normal that the billions of Chinese are fluent in it.

Due to globalization, the number of people studying Chinese is rising rapidly. The exclusive position sinologists once had is disappearing. Yet exoticism continues to play a role and have an impact. Many westerners erect a psychological barrier for themselves and never even make a start at learning Chinese, even if they live in China. This is a pity because it has a lot more consequences than you may think. You make your life more difficult than necessary if you don't make any effort to gain even a basic understanding of the language. Foreigners who speak Chinese find themselves in a more comfortable position in China. Since the Chinese have a strong tradition of insider-outsider ethics, knowledge about the language will make you more of an insider and it will make life easier. The effort you make to learn Chinese will be rewarded in unexpected ways. It will be seen as a commitment towards China, more than an effort to communicate.

Nowadays, the Chinese start to learn English from the moment they begin to speak. Chinese are good at long-term thinking; westerners usually prefer a reward for their actions on a short-term basis. Westerners keep finding excuses not to learn Chinese. "It is too difficult", "I have no time" or "The Chinese I work with speak very good English". Slowly but surely this results in a disturbance of the balance between China and the West.

The Chinese language seems so difficult and remote that it is difficult to know what is possible in which timeframe. New handbooks and language courses are published on an almost weekly basis. Masses of teaching material and packages can be found on the Internet. But what should you choose? 'Learn Chinese online' or 'Chinese in twenty lessons' or will you go for the 'Business Chinese' many institutes offer? For a beginner, it is difficult to know where to start. However, it requires little imagination to realize that 'Business Chinese' is an illusion if you don't even have a basic understanding of the language.

But there are more questions. How come one person can be wildly enthusiastic about his acquired knowledge of Chinese after two years of evening classes, while another who has spent decades studying Chinese can humbly come to realize that they will never master it all? I will never forget how my professor of classical Chinese spontaneously grabbed a dictionary when I consulted him about my translation of a part of my thesis. How was it possible that someone who had studied Chinese for more than thirty years and who was so erudite still

needed a dictionary? It came as a shock to me, even after four years of studying Eastern Languages and Cultures. I later realized how naïve I was at the time. Literary translations of Chinese can never be made without dictionaries, even if you master the language very well. The Chinese language has a great deal of flexibility and a more or less defined meaning only arises from the context in which the characters are used.

Learning Chinese is a long process involving different stages of euphoria and utter frustration. In the beginning it is difficult to memorize the characters without being able to associate them with the knowledge you already have in your head. The principle of learning by association and linking to other knowledge in your memory is impossible because there is nothing there that makes sense in the context of Chinese characters. The principle of learning by association is not possible as long as you do not have a basic understanding of the structure of the Chinese language. Since we learn by linking knowledge to other knowledge, it is quite hard to make a start. After the first victory of understanding a few characters, the euphoria comes. Initially, it is fantastic to see sentences and realize that you recognize all the characters. But therein lies the next obstacle. You are confronted with a sentence made up of characters you know and yet you still cannot read what is written because you do not see the structure of the sentence. When you start to read more fluently, the euphoria comes back again. It is absolutely fantastic when you can read Chinese texts. A new world opens up to you.

But full victory is not yet in sight. Suddenly you are confronted with the fact that the Chinese argue about the ‘right’ translation. They talk about ‘context’ and ‘preferred characters’ and ‘implications’. One says this, the other thinks that, and all of them think they are right. What is the right translation? For a westerner who does not have any insight into the language, this can be quite disorienting. You have to rely on the Chinese or on specialists for your translation and you want the correct one, but who is right?

In the meantime you have learnt that Chinese contains a lot of proverbs and idioms. The more you seem to learn, the more new ones seem to appear. After a while you find out that there are hundreds, maybe thousands, maybe tens of thousands of these proverbs. You then realize that you will never master them all. The long path of euphoria and frustration, of victory and

new obstacles stretches ahead of you. And in the end, if all goes well, you reach a level that you can live with and you know that you will keep learning for the rest of your life.

During cross-cultural training sessions, I have been asked many questions about the Chinese language and the impact language has on working with China. In this book, I try to formulate an answer to these questions. What does it mean to learn Chinese? What does it mean to speak Chinese? What does it mean to read Chinese?

There is no doubt that learning Chinese is not easy, but after all it is a language that has existed for thousands of years and more than a billion people speak and write it today, so it cannot be impossible either. Moreover, it is not that difficult to gain basic insight into the system of the language and the characters. This is what motivated me to write this book, to dispel the many misconceptions and prejudices about Chinese.

This look at the differences between Chinese and western languages and the impact of language on culture and society will be illuminating. This insight will help you to communicate well and efficiently in China, not only in your contacts with people, but also in corporate and commercial communications.

This book is not a language course; there are enough of those on the market. Neither is it a full description of the Chinese language. In this book we will look at Chinese culture and society through language. In the West, language is mainly an instrument to communicate; in China it is a lot more. The Chinese language carries the culture and history of the country. I use the Chinese language as an instrument, as a method to look at China today.

I will make an analysis of the language and pictorial language of slogans and other campaigns that are common and popular in Chinese society. Slogans are about society, politics, economy, ethics, strategy and commerce, marketing and advertising. From my analysis it will become clear that language, discourse and culture are closely connected in China.

This insight will help people who work with or in China to better understand what is at stake in written or oral translations, what the impact is of translated company names, product names, your own name, and what language formats are used in advertising in China.