Practising my English in China

X. Z. SHAO

A very personal story

[The following 'language biography' is written by a younger academic who teaches in a well-known mainland Chinese university, who grew up in a time of great difficulty and change, in which he often felt caught between ideologies, cultures, languages, and literatures, in the course of which however English became a deeply personal possession. In order to retain the authentic voice of the text, editorial 'smoothing out' has been kept to a minimum. – Editor.]

Beginnings

Born and raised in China, I learned English mostly on my own and am now an English teacher at the Department of English Language and Literature, Xiamen University, P. R. of China. I chose to read, think, speak and write in English in the summer of 1993. Unless absolutely necessary, I forced my mind to function in English instead of Chinese. Having been fond of books, especially Western literature in Chinese, for many years, I found it tough to depend solely on English sources to satisfy my needs, because my English was not good enough to enable me to digest the content of a book with ease. Disorganized ideas clustered in my mind. For a period of time, I found myself less informed and wise than I had been.

I had to concentrate on tackling my favorite poems one by one. What made it worse, my Chinese was fighting with my English to claim its legitimate domain. Many times, I thought of giving up my struggle, but my dream to be completely natural in English reminded me of my goal. I did not dare to share my aspiration even with my closest friends for fear that they might consider me as someone out of touch with reality or out of his mind.

For years before that and after, my radio had been my constant company. Tired of reading, I usually tuned into the VOA or BBC to keep my mind in the mode of English. My history of radio listening can be dated back to 1988 when I first became a student for an MA in economics at the age of 24. Although I could only understand VOA [Voice of America] Special English, I listened to normal broadcasting too. Listening without a full understanding has proved to be an effective means to improve my listening skill. Just focusing on what is coming ahead and capturing phrases and fragments of a news story, your mind will be a storehouse of them and will gradually sort out the materials, although it may take a period of time for that to happen. Exposure to English audio, video material and Western ideas is a process of information accumulation. You have an incentive to communicate with others only after you have ideas or stories to share and they are wrapped up in your mind ready in the language in which you chose to communicate. Any translation in your mind will make communication difficult and awkward. Such a philosophy and practice has paid off. I now not only can understand English media with ease, but also have a much clearer picture of the world.

Speaking English naturally is another challenge for me because not many Chinese people, including those who major in English, use English in their daily communication. Like many English frenzies in China, I was very curious about native English speakers at first, found whatever chances to talk with them at a cost of making a blunder, and even suggested

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to one of my graduate classmates that we sit in an undergraduate English class given by an American teacher. But you can't just depend on that.

Tuning in to the West

Again intense curiosity found me a way. I did a lot of repeating loudly after VOA Special, then normal English broadcasting and later BBC. I found out that reading an English text aloud and imitating eloquent English speakers, like Martin Luther King, Jr., were beneficial. After I was accepted as an English teacher at the Department of English Language and Literature in early 1995, I began to encourage my students to speak English only. Out of class most students still find it more natural to greet and talk with each other in Chinese, but I dare myself to be a nuisance and involve them by speaking in English at random encounters. My extensive reading and listening have contributed to my speaking a great deal. After going through basic sources that highlight the Western and Eastern cultures, I feel quite at home while with foreign friends and teachers, and I am able to talk at length to my students about the fields of my interest.

I had been a compulsive lover of literature in Chinese. I knew it was stupid to hold onto an obsession when the tide had turned, but I just could not stop the momentum I picked up during the whole 1980s. I dreamed to be a poet or a writer of some sort and I still kept on writing poems in Chinese until the summer of 1993 when I looked around and found myself in a deserted island. I had an MA in Economics in my pocket and held a job as a teacher at the Department of Finance and Banking, a dreamland for most young Chinese, but I was not happy. Market theory was not repulsive to me though. It has all the elements of order, logic and models that appealed to the scientific aspect of my mind. I could have been an economist if Iowa State University in the USA had granted me scholarship, but they withheld issuing a letter of admission until I could guarantee that I was financially sound, whereas the challenges of TOEFL and GRE tests did help me a great deal to expand my vocabulary. My ideas of economic reform went far ahead of the general practice then. It was in this milieu that I rescued my interest in literature via the new language media.

My English writing skill developed slowly and my impulse to write was strong. I knew my goal to write in English naturally was far from sight, but it was a secret which moved me on. I got very frustrated when I felt something stuffed inside and suffocated me. It was these moments I had to slip back to Chinese and I wrote poems on many occasions after my conversion. Except for some English letter writing (not emails) and diary keeping, I did little others, for I knew writing could be possible only after I was able to appreciate what others had written. In early May of 1995, a thrill of becoming an English teacher and other stimuli, together with my being able to get some flavor from poems of Wordsworth and Shakespeare's sonnets, prompted me to write some poems and prose articles in English.

Something flying in the air seemed to etherize me, made me daydream, and prompted me to search the right words from my limited vocabulary to put them in an order that expressed an extreme ecstasy. My English was inadequate, I must say, not even my grammar skill was ready, but I was startled to find what I had done. [One of them was on p. 46, April 2002's issue of *English Today* seven years later.] My confidence was established and I showed my writing to my close friends and timidly revealed to them my intention. It also occurred to me that creative writing was not only a matter of a language skill but also something explosive inside a writer crying for deliverance.

First moves

In 1976, when I was junior high student, at the age of 12, I had my first English class at the ancestors' temple of my village with its interiors destroyed and turned into a school. An English teacher, who knew very little English himself, from a nearby small town rode his bicycle five miles to give me first enlightenment. The second time he had a flat tire and never showed up since. I learned capital and small letters of A, B, C, D, E, F, and G from him, and later down to Z from our math teacher because I had to use them in doing algebra. My world was confined to my village and I had no idea how these letters related to English and to the countries named the USA and Britain that I heard about from my father. But those few letters had a mysterious effect on me. I drew rather than wrote them on my notebook with four-line formats for me to put them in the

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right places. My eyes were glued to the drawing as if they were objects animating a dream of my distant past.

I was the only one in my class who made it to the key senior high in my county. Although I heard that the higher education was restored nationwide, I could not understand what that meant to me at the age of 14. Senior High English texts were all Greek to me and I neglected my Chinese too, due to an irresponsible teacher of the subject. My top performance in science courses, math, physics and chemistry, kept me slightly above the bottom line of the requirement for higher education in 1980. However, my random choices on my English test paper secured me a score of 4.4 out of the total 30 points, which was crucial for keeping me from being dropped out.

Studying at the Shanghai Institute of Electric Power, I was on another planet. I became a close friend with a classmate who was good at Chinese calligraphy and well versed with the classical and the early twentieth century Chinese literature. My very Confucian great uncle had always reminded me of the importance of calligraphy and I had been praised for being good at it in many occasions. Our shared interest opened my eyes to the world of classical *shi* of Tang Dynasty and *chi* of Song Dynasty. (*Shi* is Chinese equivalent for poem, has same number of Chinese characters in each line, while *chi* is a kind of highly regulated poems composed of short and long lines.) I read some poems, short stories and novels of 'the Chinese Renaissance' during the early twentieth century. The Western influence on those writers and their quoting of English lines here and there gave me a new perspective on China and the world. They romanticized the West and lamented on China's decay and weakness.

The overwhelming mentality of the time was their admiring all elements from the West and their soul searching for what went wrong in China. I was too naïve to form a real picture of the Western and Chinese cultures. The only things I learnt from them was that British and American cultures were cool, especially the Romantic Movement in Britain. When they quoted Wordsworth, John Keats, Lord Byron, Shelley and Elizabeth Browning's lines, I thought they all knew the whole thing. You can't imagine how much I admired those who set their feet on Europe, the USA and Japan. A seed was planted in my mind, which was bound to blossom. I graduated in 1983 at the age of 19 with about a few hundred science English words in my mind, but my adventure to the Western heartland and later a hard search for who I am had begun.

The Western veil

I was assigned a job at a power construction company in my home province of Fujian after a hard bargain with my college official who controlled every graduate's fate. There was not much sign of free market economy then. All I had to do was to join a unique set of people who built power plants from one location to another and had no fixed bases. Apart from doing manual and technical works I associated with fellow graduates who were fond of music, poetry and ideas. There were some young workers, dubbed as hooligans, who enjoyed themselves with guitars, drinking and girls. They had more natural feelings than those who climbed up the power ladder of the company's management.

We had our own group and attracted some innocent girls who admired college graduates who first showed up after the Cultural Revolution. Though singing and dancing sometimes, I had profound worry and self-doubt. I did not know which way was better, to be more individualistic or to associate with those who held power over my very survival. Even my close 'hooligan' friend had often urged me to have my hair cut short, assume a mainstream behavior and wait for a chance of promotion, for he himself had suffered a lot for having confrontations with the leveling force of the society which seemed inhuman and was beyond his understanding.

It was during that period from 1983 to 1988, I exposed myself to the Western literature available in Chinese: German Goethe, British Romantic poets, Russian poets and novelists, later Dante, Shakespeare. Philosophy came to me through Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Bertrand Russell, mixed up with psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. None of these readings were systematic and, by any means, academic, but they were done in a period of my character formation. I read senior high textbooks of geography and history of China and the world, which I had not been required to do because I intended to major in science. I also bought and read books of an art history of the world, a history of the Western literature and some biographies of poets and

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writers. For the first time, I heard about Greek mythology and Homer, Christianity and the Medieval, the great Renaissance and the artists of that period.

My horizon was greatly expanded and I realized what time and space mean to an individual. My mind was in torment, for the spirits of freedom and creativity posed a sharp contrast to my muddy, callous and indifferent environment. I withdrew to an artificial world of books which sustained me in a harsh world working as an ant under the huge concrete and steel structure. Suicide almost claimed the life of a girl college graduate who jumped from the fourth flour of a building, miraculously not killed, but left with a little handicap in one leg, but I was able to dispel it even if it constantly came into my mind.

At the same time, with a little vocabulary of science at the age of 19, I embarked on a long journey to tear down the language veil to the Western world. Though I was not clearly conscious of that, a force was pushing me to that direction. I went from one textbook to another, a Chinese compiled textbook showing learners how to utter a sound of English phonetics by using long description in Chinese, *English 900s*, later *English Today*, and *New Concept English*. In the autumn of 1986 I got a chance to attend Xiamen University to learn English for four months. My head company arranged the project in order to face the challenges of constructing power plants with equipment imported from Japan and the USA. Though various efforts were made, my English was never good enough even to read the *China Daily*, the only English newspaper in China, with ease, but I knew it was good enough for me to pass the national English exam for graduate study in some field. I rescued my future through taking the exams for graduate study in the field of economics, a choice made simply because it required math, a subject of my strength since I was a first grader.

As a graduate student specialized in the field of public finance in 1988, I found socialist economic theory was only some discursive discourses built on the sands of boring political theory, so I focused much of my time on English, and my reading of humanity subjects continued. My study was interrupted by the event at the Tiananmen Square in Beijing early next year [1989]. During the second year of my graduate program I was at Sino-US Economics Training Center, Fudan University, Shanghai. Thanks to the various efforts, this project sponsored by the Ford Foundation remained open when Sino-US relation sank to the lowest point in the aftermath of the event. The program benefited me both in the understanding of the world from the perspective of market principles and in boosting my language skill through working in English exclusively and my long-term friendship with one of the US professors.

Religion

The efficient allocation of scarce resources through market mechanism, which can be clearly proven with tools of math, negated the theory of socialist economy and shed light to my mind about how China should reform its economy. My mention of the name of Christ, which I pronounced /krist/ as it sounded like, to an US professor, Charles W. Hultman, from the University of Kentucky, and his mention of the name of Confucius, which was not in my vocabulary at the time, triggered my subsequent interest in reading books about religions and Chinese heritage.

After he returned to the US, he sent me a Chinese version of the Bible and an English version of the New Testament. Jesus' words and life gave me a spiritual enlightenment so strong that I looked different and withdrew to somewhere in the light for quite a while right after I had finished reading one of the Gospels, but I was later proved to be a lamb easily attracted by a green hill. My first reading of Confucius' *Analects* was even more dramatic, for I wondered how he was able to summarize the rules of my behavior in a book some 2,500 years ago and say so many wise words that Chinese still use today.

My association with friends who practiced Buddhism or speculated on Daoism and Confucianism thinking made me plunge deeper in the search for who I am as a Chinese. I found comfort in Confucianism teaching on how to remain calm and vigorous in cultivation of self under harsh situation and great poverty, without being understood and recognized. I was also greatly fascinated by Zhuangzi's ideas of natural growth and non-interference to each other. A huge mystical bird Kun and a small sparrow are both parts of nature; there is no need to compare with and ridicule each other. To grow in my own way and to not be overwhelmed by discontent had been some of the wisdoms keeping me on the right tracks. At

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long last, I had a paradigm of my own to turn a critical eye to the Western stuff that I had swallowed indiscriminately as many young admirers of the West are still doing now.

A civilization of reason, of endless individual endeavors, of thinking that nature can be studied and put to the full use of humankind, of distinguishing the extreme good and bad and casting the bad out as evil, of being too self-assertive and smashing others through colonization, has brought human beings to an unprecedented stage of confrontation with nature and among themselves. It still takes time for human dramas to play out before human beings realize that Chinese ancient sages have points to make.

Literature

Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore has an influence upon many Chinese. His writing appeals to Chinese for his strong sense of belonging, his compassion and his ideals of harmony with nature. His prose poems were admired, widely read and imitated by the Chinese literati even when he was alive. I was told that he was well versed with English and his poem *Gitanjali* was highly praised by W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound, and took the Western literary world by storm, which secured him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. (Later I learnt he translated the poems from Bengali into English and they were polished by Yeats.) His legend has been a great inspiration to many who practice literature and English.

I went even further to check out Indian ancient religious poems that influenced Tagore. I did not find much, but the available material did give me a glimpse of Indian religion, poetry and philosophy. I began to respect that country more. Psychologically, India is farther away from China than is the USA, even if Buddhism originated there. Du Weiming, a Harvard University Chinese American professor, urged Chinese students turn more attention to our spiritually rich neighbor. He was right but might not have been heard.

Shakespeare in Chinese also influenced me a great deal during my period of graduate study. I read Chinese version of his poems and most of his plays. Thanks to a great Chinese translator, Zhu Shenghao, Shakespeare is as alive as he is in any English-speaking world. Zhu lived and was educated during the first half the twentieth century, it is said his many translated manuscripts was once burned due to the Japanese air raids during the war and he had to start them over again. He died young, but he left China a version of Shakespeare as powerful as the original. I still cannot imagine now how he was able to do the translation into such a good Chinese at such a young age while I have to labor at digging out the meaning of English Shakespeare. I once read Hamlet aloud in Chinese and it was so touching that my fellow graduate classmates could not help repeating the lines when Hamlet torments his mother with his tongue.

That was the wandering of my mind before 1993. The vivid memory of 1980s seems a mirage. Having shifted to English for while I had many dreams in English. When I woke up I could remember exactly what I said and my conversation with other figures in my dream seemed well-organized. It marked a turning point, for it meant English had entered into my sub-consciousness. A Chinese woman, who emigrated to the USA and later became an US citizen and a visiting Fulbright professor to my department, agreed with me and told me she had exactly the same experience. Now my Chinese takes a backseat in my mind. When necessary, it surfaces naturally; when unnecessary, it sinks without a trace, but I do experience certain moments when I become a little slow to put down some Chinese characters.

Chinese is a wonderful language for poetry. When I read Li Bai, I hardly can find an English poem which conveys such a sensation. Maybe I am biased or maybe my English needs further improvement. When the time is right I may write in Chinese again. I now read widely with a better and better understanding of difficult writers and poets and have built up a large collection of books in English covering many fields of my interest over last 15 years.

Learning and teaching

You may be curious about my extreme approach to English. Well, if you go to China and see how Chinese, including most university students and teachers, take immediate material gains as a priority and shy away from doing highbrow things, such as art, literature and philosophy, you will see my madness is guided by reason. My interest survives in English and I am able to make a living by showing my skill.

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Maybe I have a few points to make regarding English learning and teaching. Firstly, for me a human mind is like a camera and a sound recorder. What it sees and hears will be kept somewhere within and without one's consciousness. When you have acquired a certain basic English vocabulary about 3,000 words and basic grammar rules, which is easy for most learners, all you should do is listen and read as much as you can without demand for a full understanding. After the forms and sounds have stimulated your mind a great many times, they will become natural to you gradually.

If I move to a new town, I will not try to get familiar with the people in the town by visiting every house in it, rather, I will forget that I am a stranger by showing up here and there, greeting people I meet casually, and soon all their faces will look familiar to me. I learnt how to speak Shanghai dialect, which is completely different from Mandarin, in a few months by listening to my roommates' late night chat when I was a science student. My good Chinese skill was acquired after I read a great many books. Both experiences have been precious for the development of my English skill.

Secondly, reading is difficult not because of one's limit vocabulary but because of one's slow response to texts written in easy English words. I did many experiments by showing an easy segment of English text with its Chinese translation to my English major juniors. They spot the meaning in Chinese at one glance and told me the English lines meant the same thing a few seconds later. The same thing happened when it came to an audio text. I told them those easy English words are still new to them in some way because of the gap. Then I wrote an English word 'autumn' and it Chinese counterpart *qiu* on the board, the Chinese character gave them a sense coolness and yellow leaves' falling, while English word seems appealing much less to their senses.

It is the slow response to English texts and an English poem's imagery that makes reading a headache rather then a pleasure. Suppose a native English mind processed a word 100,000 times before it established an instinctive response to it, then a Chinese learner should do the same. Therefore, going through easy visual, audio material as much as one can is the only way to solve the problem. I always hear students complain that their limited vocabulary prevents them from understanding a particular English news story. If I write out every word of the news story, they tell me they know every single word of it. The problem is clear and the solution is simple.

Thirdly, since a native mind functions 24 hours a day in English, you [a non-native] cannot become fluent in English by spending only 2, 4, or 8 hours per day beginning from your early teen. You have no choice but to set your mind 24 hours a day in English for at least a period of a few years if you are really serious about English. You may wonder how one can do that in China. Well, that is easy. If you are tired of reading, get a radio to listen to. If you are bored by radio, then talk with your friends in English or take a walk and try to think in English, letting everything come into your mind in English. There are all kind of modern means of exposure to English, including watching TV, online chatting, VCD movies, pop songs, and corresponding with your friends through emails. If you ask me how your mind can learn English while you are sleeping, well, just leave it alone and it will function in English if your daily effort is long enough.

Last but not least, every language is a tool for communication within a particular culture and civilization. Everyone's inner makeup is a mixture of influences by a direct contact with her or his surrounding, history, religion, tales and legends, literature and art, philosophy and the system of the economy and politics, and so on. To understand what highlights the English speaking, or the Western world is crucial to one's understanding of every subject matter wrapped up in English. The purpose of cross cultural communication is to enhance understanding between different peoples, therefore, one should also be aware more of one's own underlying cultural residue before any such communication can make sense.

Heritage

Whenever I mention to my students that reading Chinese cultural heritage, mainly Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, together with our history and classical literature is important, some of them wear a funny smile and very few of them take me seriously. This is understandable in modern China for its ancient traditions and heritages were demonized for a few decades and virtually three generations have been left without much nourishment from our ancient sages. I myself was fully aware of its importance only in 1989 at

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the age of 25 after journeying to the West and experiencing a sharp contrast of the two civilizations.

This is probably the saddest thing in China and its consequence is obvious. Fortunately, books on Chinese heritage are available across China now and there are people like some of my friends who have read and practiced them and have hooked up with their roots. Those who aim at cross-cultural dialogue should do the same, if they hope to have something to share with the English-speaking world. ■

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