十四

Street signs were my textbooks
bus stops, bills, and menus
quizzes and tests
were all about venues
thrown into the water
I’d learned how to swim
and the jar with the map
was a memory dim

Chapter 14 - Character Confusions and Other Stumbling Blocks

Reading and writing Chinese is difficult. The US based Foreign Service Institute classifies Chinese as a Category 5 language (along with Arabic, Japanese, and Korean) for speakers of English. French and Spanish are classified as Category 1 because of the large number of cognates they share with English. There is very little that is intuitive about learning Chinese for a person growing up outside of a Chinese language environment. There is no phonetic alphabet which helps readers and writers of many languages to "sound out" words and spell them phonetically. Of course, Chinese parents and siblings read children's books to children so kids learn to recognize characters before they learn to write them. And when they do start learning to write characters, close attention is paid to how they hold the writing instrument and how to write each stroke. Even though it is labor intensive work that requires a huge investment of time and effort, the 2018 CIA Factbook claims a literacy rate in Taiwan of 98.5%; in mainland China, 96.4%.

That said, few people educated outside of a Chinese education system ever become truly literate in Chinese. The number of non-Chinese who have studied and are studying Chinese both inside and outside of China was growing by leaps and bounds (before COVID), yet the number of these people who can pick up a Chinese newspaper, magazine, or book and easily read from them is still relatively small, and of that number, the number of non-Chinese who can write and publish in Chinese is miniscule.

With all that in mind, here are a few things that I discovered about reading and writing Chinese during my own journey that were not explained in the text books I encountered.

Up to down, right to left, and left to right – 100 years ago Chinese sentences and phrases were almost always written from top to bottom and from right to left. Books in Chinese were read "from back to front." It wasn't until the mid-20thcentury that writing horizontally from left to right in published texts started appearing on the scene in China. A big part of the reason for doing this had to do with making the learning of Chinese easier. If Pinyin is included in the text, it is much easier to input words horizontally than vertically. Today, it is common to see Chinese phrases and sentences written both vertically and horizontally (often on the same sign). What can be confusing is when a horizontal sentence or phrase is written from right to left (instead of from left to right). Occasionally there are signs where both right to left and left to right are used. Then, one has to rely on context.

Fonts and styles – There have always been different styles of writing in Chinese. Beginners learn characters by writing them one stroke at a time, similar to how English speakers begin learning English letters. Most of us were taught how to hold a pencil, and the correct order for writing the strokes in each of our letters. After printing, people in my generation were taught how to write cursive. There may be as many fonts and styles of written Chinese as there are of written English. To illustrate the importance of stroke order in cursive English, I used to write "The United States of America" on the white board as fast as I could and purposely tried to make it illegible. Although I made it so hurried that not one letter could be distinguished, students could still make out "The United States of America," because they watched me write the words in the correct stroke order. In some of the most beautiful calligraphy in Chinese, individual strokes are impossible to pick out, but because of understood stroke order, it is obvious what each character is by following the flow of the strokes.

More character confusions – things I only learned by asking!

- **Car license plates** – During my travels in Guangdong, I grew curious when I saw the character 粵 Yuè at the beginning of every license plate. I was told that 粵 Yuè was an abbreviation for Guangdong. It came from the historical kingdom of Yue of which Guangdong was a part; The character 京 Jīng on license plates in Beijing made more sense since I knew that 京 Jīng meant capital

and Beijing is the capital of China; 闽 Mǐn for the province of Fujian also confused me. I knew that Taiwanese was also called the Minnan dialect. The word 闽 Mǐn comes from the Min river in northern Fujian and is an abbreviation for Fujian.

- **Numbers** – The numbers 1-10 are some of the easiest characters to learn in Chinese. Because they're so easy, when writing a check and in other financial transactions, numbers are easy to alter. To address this, there is another way of writing numbers. A zero in Chinese is often written like this, "0". The word for zero and the character used in finance, however, is 零 líng. The number one requires only a single stroke 一 yī. The number one used in finance, however looks like this, 壹 yī; two (二 èr) becomes 贰 èr, five (五 wǔ) becomes 伍, ten (十 shí) becomes 拾.
- **Others** – I used to get really confused when I went to the market and saw a sign saying 7 折 (qī zhé). In the market place, Chinese often use Arabic numerals for convenience sake. It turns out that the character 折 (zhé) means "discount." But 7 折 doesn't mean 7% or 70% off. It means 30% off or 70% of the original cost.

Abbreviating names of institutions – In the same way Americans refer to Oklahoma University as OU and Brits refer to Manchester United as Man U, China has similar abbreviations. National Taiwan University (台灣大學 Táiwān Dàxué*)* →台大 Tái Dà; Beijing University (北京大学 Běijīng Dàxué*)* →北大 Běi Dà; Communist Party of China (中國共產黨 Zhōngguó Gòngchǎndǎng) → 中共 Zhōng Gòng; Chinese-American 中美 Zhōng Měi, as in Chinese American friendship 中美友谊 Zhōng Měi yǒuyì and Chinese American relations 中美关系 Zhōng Měi guānxì.

Speaking Chinese – Saying "I speak Chinese" is not really accurate. It is different than saying "I speak English." When I travel to Canada, England, New Zealand, and Australia, I may misunderstand some of the phrases and pronunciation, but communication is rarely a problem. Chinese is different. Mandarin, Cantonese, and Taiwanese (all dialects of Chinese) sound as different as French, Spanish, and Italian. Some words and phrases sound similar, but most do not. When I went to Taiwan and to Hong Kong, I expected to "pick up" Taiwanese and Cantonese quickly, but I never did. I have all sorts of excuses. More tones. Too colloquial. No standard form of Romanization. Putonghua is the national language of both the PRC and of Taiwan and is the most understood and most standardized of all Chinese dialects, but it's more accurate to say "I speak Mandarin (Putonghua)" or "I speak Cantonese" than to say, "I speak Chinese."