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So I boarded the plane
and headed due west
I had more great teachers
my Chinese progressed
Then one day while watching
my clothes tumble dry
a voice called out softly
“get ready to fly”



Chapter 21 – Learning Chinese in America

You can take the cowboy out of China, but you can't take China out of the cowboy. In Spring, 1979, I needed to leave Taiwan and go back to Oklahoma. My sister's kidneys were failing from Type 1 diabetes. She needed a kidney transplant. After preliminary tests at Taipei's Veteran's Hospital and a follow up consultation with the head of the Nephrology department at UCLA established that my overall health should remain strong and I would be able to continue being physically active and be able to play most sports, I was on my way to becoming a donor. No kidneying!

Everything worked out well. Mary's new kidney went to work while she was still on the operating table. During my recuperation, I received a note from H.J. Green, the Principal of Booker T. Washington High School in Tulsa, asking me if I might be interested in teaching Chinese. BTW was a magnet school located in the heart of north Tulsa. Even before it became an official "magnet" for the Tulsa Public Schools in 1973, Booker T. had been a magnet for Tulsa's African-American community since its opening in 1913. It was one of a small number of buildings in the area of Black Wall Street that remained intact at the end of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. When it opened its doors as a magnet school to students from all over Tulsa, to promote voluntary racial integration, it did so with the promise of combining a stellar athletic program with an academic curriculum which would be second to none. We were home to Tulsa's first ever International Baccalaureate program and students from all over Tulsa wanted in. Principal Green was a visionary and he really wanted a Chinese language program at Booker T. Even after I confessed that I had never taught Chinese before, H.J. Green was willing to give me a try.

Before the 1980's, there weren't a lot of Chinese Language programs in the USA. Two of the early intensive programs were the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center at the Presidio in Monterey, California, and the LDS Missionary Training Center in Utah, but they both had pretty specific agendas and clientele. Universities like Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and Yale had developed Chinese language programs in the US, and also had well established programs in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, but these programs were all for university students.

The earliest initiative in secondary school education that I'm aware of in the US was from the Carnegie Foundation in the early 1960's. There were 230 high schools involved. But by the end of the 1960's, when the funding stopped, so did most of the programs. By the 1980's few of the programs which had been seeded by the Carnegie Foundation were still in existence. The second wave came with the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. Starting in 1982, the Dodge foundation helped start and fund 60 high school programs in the US.

In 1982, I was at the right place at the right time. In Tulsa, Nancy McDonald helped me write a grant proposal to the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and Timothy Light from Ohio State University was sent to check us out. I was fortunate to meet and to learn from amazing people like Dr. Light, T.T. Ch'en and Zhou Zhi Ping from Princeton, Perry Link from UCLA, Ron Walton from the University of Maryland, and John Berninghausen from Middlebury College. Nearly every summer in the 1980's, secondary school Chinese language teachers from all over America met and helped one another become better teachers of Chinese. With the help of many of these same mentors and the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, we were able to establish the Chinese Language Association of Secondary Schools in the late 1980's. We ran summer programs at Middlebury College, Northfield Mt. Herman School in Massachusetts, and Iolani School in Hawaii. One summer 20 of us converged at the Beijing Language and Culture University (at that time called 北京语言学院 Běijīng Yǔyán Xuéyuàn) for an intense month of learning together with 20 Chinese language teachers from all over China.

