

## The Open University Online Confucius Institute, and Open Centre for Languages and Cultures *Distinguished Speaker Series, 05 Feb 2024*



[Edited transcript]

### **KAN, Qian**

Good afternoon, good morning, and good evening to all of you who have come to our first session of the year in our Online Confucius Institute and the Open Centre for Languages and Cultures' *Distinguished Speaker Series*. Today's topic is '*Harmony in diversity: navigating life and work in China with intercultural competence*.' I am KAN, Qian, I'm Director of the Online Confucius Institute at the Open University. I am also Head of Chinese in the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics, and it is my great pleasure to introduce Nick Thomas.

Nick was appointed to the role of Director, British Council China, and Minister (Culture and Education) at the British Embassy, Beijing. In this role, he oversees the British Council's work to support more connections in education and culture between the UK and China. He was appointed to the role in February 2023. British Council China is one of the largest country operations in the BC's global network of 100+ offices.

China has been a major focus of Nick's career. He first visited China in the early 1990s. His undergraduate degree at Oxford University was in Chinese Studies, and he spent more than a decade living and working in China, both in Beijing and Shanghai, before he joined the British Council. He also has an MA in International Affairs from The Australian National University (ANU), which focused substantially on East Asia.

His career at the British Council began as Country Director Philippines between 2013 and 2018. He then spent two years in London working on South Asia and East Asia, before moving to Country Director Ukraine, originally based in Kyiv before moving to Warsaw after Russia's invasion in February 2022.

We are honoured that Nick has made time in his busy schedule to share his experiences of studying Chinese for over 30 years, his reflections on living and working in China for more than a decade and supporting a wide range of UK organisations engaging with China. Over to you Nick.

### **Nick Thomas**

Thank you, Qian. It's real pleasure to be here and thank you very much to the Open University online Confucius Institute. As Qian said, I've been learning Chinese for 30 years; I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing, in the sense that I should surely have finished learning it by now (!), but I think it's always going to be work in progress.

I want to talk about just a few things today. It's a slightly eclectic presentation that I've put together. I'm going to try and do is talk about three things. One is my own experience of learning Chinese. As

you heard, I'm still learning it so I'm not sure I'm the best person to give tips on that, but I will talk about that experience. I think there are three key things there: motivation, challenges that I've faced learning it, and a few tips and tricks - for what they're worth. I'm sure you've got many, many better ones though; I want to talk a little bit about intercultural fluency as well; and then I thought it might be interesting just to talk a little bit about the work that we do at the British Council in China, which I think is very closely related in the sense that our remit is really to build connections, understanding and trust between the UK and other countries - in this case, China. So I think it all it all hopefully connects and then we can go to some questions after

So, I want to start with, why learn a language in the first place? I think we all have very different reasons. (I should also add, by the way, that everything I'm about to say comes with a big health warning in that I have no training as a language teacher, I have no training in linguistics, but it's really about personal experience.) I think are different reasons that we learn a language and I'll just talk through my own experience with learning Chinese. I started becoming interested in Chinese when I was, I guess, in the sixth form at school when I was about 16, 17 and I became interested because I enjoyed learning languages. I did French at 'A' level, I did Latin at 'A' level, and Chinese just seemed to me to be kind of the ultimate challenge. I remember in a bookshop coming across a Chinese dictionary in the in the languages section and realizing that I could not make head or tail of how it worked. I couldn't read a thing and so that kind of intrigued me. I saw it as a puzzle that I wanted to explore. And, at around the same time, I became interested in China. Again, it was something I knew almost nothing about, it was this sort of big, you know, culturally important country on the other side of the world. I'd never really been outside of Europe and so I just began to read up on it, and I began to read also about how the Chinese language worked, and I became more and more intrigued. So I decided to apply to study Chinese at university, which was quite a leap because this was the early 90s and I think China had a much lower profile in the UK at the time. If you went into a bookshop - as some people may remember - and tried to find books on China, there were a few, but it was generally a small section of a bookshop tucked away somewhere.

I often got asked, why are you learning Chinese? I think that's changed a lot now. I think it's become far more mainstream, t's become far more far more obvious, but for me, at the time, it was really about an interest in language. I remember at my university interview being given English sentences to try and analyse. It was sort of a test, and I remember being given a question. It was just a simple sentence. It was: 'Heads I win, tails you lose situation,' and you were asked to kind of explain how it worked grammatically. I realized many years later, of course, that that is a very Chinese sentence pattern in the sense that you can take a whole, a whole sort of verbal phrase and add a little on the end and turn it into an adjective. I can't remember what I said in my interview, hopefully I got close to that.

But I also I took a year out before I went to university, and I went to China for part of that. I went to China for about five months, and I did two months of study in Beijing and then I backpacked around China for three months and pretty much went the whole length and breadth of the country. I went from Beijing to Xi'an; I went down to the south-west, the far corners of Yunnan; I went all the way up to the north-east, I saw the ice lanterns in Harbin; and I went to Shanghai. That kind of sucked me in as well, and just the sheer cultural diversity of China, but also the experience of travelling, travelling by myself, having to learn how to get around, how to buy tickets, how to order food for the first time. I'm sure many people here have had a similar experience. I ordered some very strange food at various points by mistake because I really couldn't speak very good Chinese, but the confidence that comes from that kind of experience in somewhere very different was a fantastic experience and, I think, really broadened my horizons. If I were to do the same visit today, I guess that I would have Google Translate or I would have something similar, I would but I think what I really enjoyed about that visit was just learning to be able myself, the access that gave me to a completely different way of looking at the world and a completely different way of life. I'm a big fan of technology and apps and

all the things that you can now do with Ed Tech around language, but I think there is absolutely no substitute for having the language in your own head.

I came back from China, and I started studying at university and it was a quite an academic course; I did spoken Chinese, but there was a big emphasis on reading and particularly reading texts, and particularly reading different versions of Chinese. We began from the 5th century BC and went all the way through to the 20th century. We probably spent more time in the past than we did in the present, and I enjoyed that hugely. I mean classical Chinese I found very difficult, but I found it again a kind of language puzzle, I found it fascinating and the fact that you could use different words in so many different ways. The same word could be a noun, it could be a verb, it could be put in a different position in the sentence and it could be used differently. And the fact that you could say actually a huge amount with just a relatively small number of characters, I really enjoyed that. So I came out with a degree but not speaking particularly good Chinese, but I guess at the time I could read it reasonably well and I know that these days that's quite an old fashioned way of approaching a language. I mean, it was obviously it was a language and literature degree really – bits of history - but in fact I found that a very rewarding way to learn Chinese, and in fact, although my classical Chinese today is not what it was - which is not to say it was ever very much - but a lot of that has stayed with me. And I think the importance of Chinese being a continuous literary language where you can still read fairly well the language from 2000 years ago and beyond, I think is just a very important feature of the language. I've always valued the time and investment that I put into it at that point when I came out of university. I put the Chinese to one side for a while and I went to work in London for a couple of years, but then I began to get itchy feet again and I wanted to go and work in China.

I'd been slightly put off professional opportunities in relation to my Chinese because in a couple of interviews when I came out of university, I was told, 'you've got some language skills, but that's nothing special; there are lots of people who speak Chinese', which is obviously true. I did a work trip to China about two years into my working life and kind of got the bug again and realized then also that it wasn't just about language skills: it was about bringing different a different perspective. By going and working in a foreign country you bring a different perspective, you develop new skills yourself and by having that diversity in the workplace, that's how you can develop professionally. So, despite some advice that I think with hindsight probably wasn't very good at the time, I then moved out to China and planned to spend about two years there and ended up spending more than a decade, thirteen years in fact, mostly in Beijing and a couple of years in Shanghai with, with a year studying in Australia in the middle. I think that during that whole period, I had a very limited view of the role of my language skills at the time: I thought it was just quite a transactional skill. I think over the time that I spent in China, the skills, the networks, the challenges and so on that I had to deal with, I think that was a fantastic training in terms of intercultural fluency and learning to deal with very different contexts, very different situations, different people, and so the confidence comes out of that.

So that was that was how I got into working life in China - my first few years were working in advertising. But in fact, after a few years I moved into a role where I was beginning to advise other people on how to work in China, how to work with China. This was before I joined the British Council and so again, developing some intercultural fluency, the skills to help people interpret China was something I turned into a living and a way of life.

One other aspect around learning a language that that I think it's important to mention - and again, I'm sure many people here have had similar experiences - is a self confidence that comes with it. It's obviously a huge investment in time and effort, particularly with a language like Chinese, but the situations that you can find yourself in, where despite many bad days where it doesn't come out very well, you managed to have a meeting where it all goes very well in the language or you make a speech and it goes very well in the language, I think there's there are very few things that I've experienced that can that can provide the same level of self-confidence.

And the final thing I would just mention is mental health. For me there's something very ... almost grounding in the routine of learning a language and I found that with Chinese. When I was in Ukraine, it was mostly during COVID, and I worked very hard on trying to develop my Ukrainian, and I've learned other languages. I think just spending half an hour or an hour every day that kind of routine is something that is very, you know ... Once I get into the habit of doing that, if I don't have that in the morning, my day hasn't begun. I think there's something very important to be said about the routine that you have when you learn a language. I'll just mention some challenges I've found with Chinese and another languages and some tips, for what they're worth. I'm sure that there are people here with many better ideas.

Sustaining motivation. ... The challenge is that it's very easy to start a language: we get excited about another country or we see a film or we read a book, but sustaining it over the months and years - and in the case of Chinese, I think for many of us decades - can be a challenge, and certainly, as I've said, I've parked Chinese at various points for a few years because I've focused on other things. I've always come back to it, but for me the thing in terms of sustaining the motivation is always engaging with the culture, and that was quite difficult when I first started learning Chinese in the 90s because China was much harder to access from the UK. You really had to go to China and spend time there to engage with the culture in a substantial way. There were fewer films, there were fewer books, online obviously didn't yet really exist, so there are many, many more opportunities now to to engage with the culture, and I think that's really important.

Variety. Within that, it is really important not to get stuck in one particular groove and to try and do different things. I mentioned before the routine. That might just be my personality, but I think just having that sort of routine every day where you have half an hour, an hour or even 10 minutes, two or three times a week and keeping that rhythm is crucially important. At university I spent a lot of time in the language lab as well. A lot of people I know find the sounds of Chinese quite difficult; it's a tonal language, which requires a lot of drill. For me the answer to that is just repetition and drill and drill and drill and listening extremely carefully. I found that productive with other languages as well. I'm a big fan of the [Pimsleur](#) series, there's very little vocab, there's very little grammar, but what they force you to do is to listen very carefully for the sounds and the phonemes, and to pronounce them, to drill them, and to use them in different combinations. I know some people find that horrifically boring, but actually I'm a big fan. Again, going back to routine, for me, it's almost like going to the gym or something like that. I find it quite therapeutic. I find something very similar with the characters - although I think this is a much harder discipline these days with computers and being able to type in Pinyin or whatever it is and getting the characters up. I forget the saying about how many times you're supposed to write a character before you can remember it, but I have gone through lots and lots of notebooks writing the characters, writing characters, writing the character. In fact, it's still a habit to this day. If I'm in a meeting, I will write characters - usually the same one, which is probably not very good practice - but again, I just think that constant drill and, of course, learning the right order for writing the characters so that you're writing them correctly when you you're doing that.

The other thing that I've used a lot more recently is [Anki](#). Unfortunately, this was not available when I first learned Chinese, it would have saved me huge amounts of time. It's a [spaced repetition](#) app, so I'm a big fan of Anki, which again many people know. There are others, but for those who are not familiar with it, it allows you to put in vocabulary, but for me, more importantly, sentences and sentence patterns, and you can put them into a computer - it goes on to the Cloud - you can get it onto your mobile phone or other devices, and it allows you to test yourself in all sorts of different ways.

I'm a big fan of less of learning vocabulary, but more of learning sentence patterns and I'm very greedy with sentence patterns, so if I see a sentence pattern that I find interesting or that uses words in a particular way, then I will capture it and put it into my *Anki* and I will set it up so it tests me on how a particular word has been used. So that kind of helps with usage and I think that's particularly

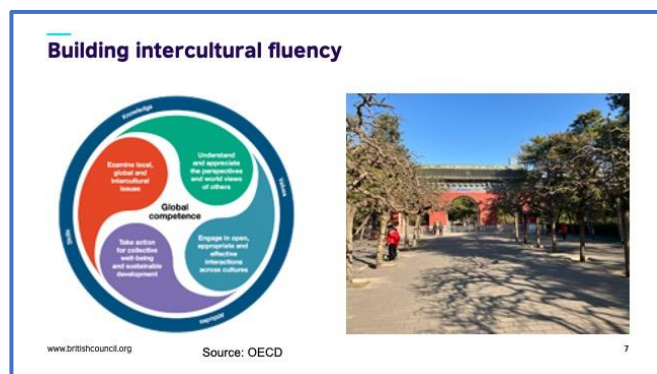
important with Chinese because for me one of the big challenges has always been and remains abstract words in Chinese.

So the fact you have, 情况 (qing kuang), 局势 (ju shi) and 形状 (xing zhuang), all these different words for situations that have different meanings and different connotations, sometimes more negative, sometimes more positive, is hugely challenging the time it takes very often to go through reference books or to ask people to understand that nuance is very time consuming. So, when you get to capture it and put it in one place, I'm very greedy about that. And of course, the other thing about spaced repetition is they have algorithms that load it back, so depending on whether you remember it or not, it will come back more or less frequently. I'm big fan of that. As I said, patterns more than vocab for me.

And then, of course, as everyone knows, immersion at every opportunity, throwing yourself into situations and just trying to speak the language and not worrying too much how it plays out and not feeling too bad if it goes horribly wrong, but just keep keeping going, listening to radio, watching television, even if you don't understand it: if you sit there long enough, eventually you will understand more of it. At least that's my philosophy.

So, for what it's worth, those are things I found very helpful with Chinese and other languages, but I know that other people will have many other tips and many other ideas, but that's my own experience.

Intercultural fluency. I've talked about this already quite a lot. I've got a framework here, from the [OECD](#) showing 'global competence'. There are other different frameworks out there. For me, language is really just one part of this. To be honest, it's not even always a necessary part of it, but I think it's often a kind of key skill that takes you into this world of global competence, or intercultural fluency. For me, working in China has always been



hugely interesting, hugely challenging. What I've always enjoyed is the fact that you are constantly confronted with different perspectives, different ideas. China itself is, of course hugely diverse, and different cities are quite different from each other. Dealing with different situations in a foreign country is, I think, something that develops your capabilities in all sorts of different ways. As I said, I came into working in China through language and I stayed and I think my language skills improved initially, probably in my first five years, and that was when I was working largely in Chinese. I've had to get there, or I would not really be able to do my job. Later on, I moved into a role where it was much more English-speaking, and my language probably suffered as a result. I think it kind of plateaus, but it was a role, as I mentioned before, where I was advising other organizations on how to work in China, how to work with China. So, I shifted into a role where I think intercultural fluency became more important. In my early years in China, I made all the usual mistakes that I think foreigners make when they come to China. I came from global headquarters, I thought I knew best, and over that time I think I gradually learned a bit more humility; I learned how to work with people who had very different perspectives from my own; I learned to listen much better; I think I learned more empathy. Those things I think will always be areas to improve on, but with the equivalent time in the UK, I don't think I would have learned nearly as much. I went into a role where it was much more about advising others and learning about, seeing how, they saw China. I could learn a lot from that, but at the same time, there were things that I was able to share to help them. So again, that was kind of a shift in my career. Then I reached a point where I realized that I was saying to people I was advising quite a lot, that 'China is like this' or 'in China it's like that' and then they would say

things like, 'well it's like that everywhere else as well'. And then I began to realize that probably it was time to move on from China for a while and get some experience elsewhere. I was actually starting to become almost entirely focused on China and I felt that my perspective was limited by that because I really only had China in my career. So, I joined the British Council into a role in the Philippines and I think what I found there was that the Philippines was, of course, very different from China, but a lot of the skills that I developed by working in a very different country and by working in situations that were very unfamiliar, I was able to carry across what were quite portable skills.

And certainly, in the British Council programs that we put on - I can talk about this in a moment - where we bring young people from the UK out to China to learn Mandarin, but also to experience a very different country. I think that the confidence and the skills that they develop - and this is the feedback that we get a lot - that this is really portable and it really, really improves your employability, and it's a hugely valuable set of skills to have. I spent five years in Manila and I went back to the UK and I guess I had almost reverse culture shock in the sense that, I'd sort of assumed that a lot of things had changed from the UK in my head: it was a place I used to go for a few weeks every year for holiday, so it was always relatively warm, the sun was generally shining and I hadn't lived through a UK winter for 18 years - and I had changed a lot as well, and so that was quite an adjustment and kind of a reverse culture shock going back to the UK. I realized that it's very difficult once you've immersed yourself in an international work environment, then to let go of it. It was great to be back in the UK and to reconnect, but I was quite lucky to have a job that was still very internationally connected. I was working with South Asia, I was working with East Asia, I was still traveling quite a lot and I was working with colleagues in the British Council, who generally, like me, had been working around the world and so that had its own culture, that was a relatively easy way to come back, but it was definitely a reverse culture shock experience.

I'll just talk a little bit about the British Council's work, which sort of comes out of that, because I think the British Council lives and breathes language and culture and difference, and that's been a fantastic experience for me. It's the ideal organization almost if you have an interest in other cultures, an interest in language. If you enjoy travelling, then there are few better places to be. But in China we have a really big program. As you would expect, the relationship with China is a very important one and we do lots of work. What we do is really all about building connections between people and from that you build more understanding and from that you build more trust. It's really about sort people-to-people relations, I guess, in the end.

We work in a number of different areas. One area is in arts and culture, so we do work basically to connect artists or arts institutions or cultural institutions in the UK to their counterparts in China. We do that through sharing information, we do that through brokering connections, but we also do that through funding collaborative projects. Everything that we do is about partnership, and so we fund different projects.

These are some pictures from an event we did in Guangzhou in December that was a big forum on disability art. We brought artists out from the UK who either are disabled or work in the disability art sector to talk to their Chinese counterparts and to explore how they see the world and how they approach different challenges and to exchange ideas.



It was a fantastic two-day event with some really good discussions, and we had a live audience at the

event and we had a hybrid audience as well. We reached hundreds of thousands of people in China, so it was a really exciting event. That's the work we do in arts and culture. It's very active.

Since the lifting of the travel restrictions just over a year ago, we're seeing a huge amount of reconnecting going on: a lot of UK arts institutions coming out, we've supported delegations from China to go to the Edinburgh festivals, to Manchester, and other places, so there's a real sense of things happening in that space, which is exciting.

The other area that we work in - this is globally but in China they are big parts of our portfolio - is in education, higher education and, of course, English language, so higher education. We work to promote UK education in China. We do a lot of work to support education partnerships between the UK higher education institutions and their Chinese counterparts. Again, very active. It's been very busy year over the last 12 months again with a lot of reconnecting after people were cut off from face-to-face, and there's a lot of online innovation that went on at that time, but I think there's a sense of returning much more to a face-to-face format now.

We do a huge amount of work with UK universities, Chinese universities, we support four different consortia of universities that are working together in different ways. One of the really interesting parts for us, for higher education, is the experience that students get either going from China to the UK and the experience they get spending anything between one or four or five years studying in the UK, and the lifelong connections and friendships and experience and the intercultural fluency component that they develop from that, but also another area that we've worked on quite a lot over the last 10 years is bringing UK students out to China, which I think is really, really important. We don't have enough people in the UK who speak Mandarin. I always think 'the more the better' on that. I think it's obviously hugely positive for young people in the UK to get experience of China and how it works. We've supported a lot of that band activity from the UK over the last 10 years, obviously interrupted during the pandemic.

We have a program called [Generation UK](#) that we have supported since 2013, which is really for young adults finishing university and coming into the workplace. And then, as I think many of you will be aware, the [Mandarin Excellence](#) program, which we support, which is funded by the Department for Education, which teaches Mandarin to students up to GCSE. It's a Year 9 to Year 11, or Year 7 to Year 11 - I forget which precisely it is - there about fifteen hundred students studying on that. I think six and a half thousand students have gone through that program and in the British Council we support the outbound component to China. The students come for a couple of weeks each year, we've got a big group coming out in July, a very large group, which we're very excited about, and the point I would make on that is that that is actually a life-changing experience for many of them.

So, to go back to the motivations for learning a language and the connections between that and immersing yourself in the culture and the skills that come out of it, that's about confidence that if you can tackle this situation, you can tackle any situation. That's a really important part of the program. Certainly, that's the feedback we get from many of the students. I saw a quote from one of the students we brought out for *Generation UK*, who was talking about working in a law firm in China for eight weeks basically saying, 'If I can do that, if I can work in a law firm for eight weeks in Beijing and get by with the language, then I can do anything'. The confidence that comes out of that is really, really important.

I think I will probably stop there, looking at the time, I'll probably stop there. So, thank you.

#### **KAN, Qian**

Thank you very much, Nick, for a very interesting, fascinating talk, actually, based on your own experience and it really shows that being able to speak language, you not only benefited from that enriching your own life experience, but it also allowed you to contribute to the organizations you work for, so thank you for the talk.

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