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Personal and Professional

If David is anything, he's a communicator. Soon after meeting him, you're likely to learn about his sport of choice (tennis, the reason we met), his hometown (Shanghai, China) (3), and his opinion of his first semester at Haverford (great overall, with serious misgivings about the dining center). Summarizing him that way may make him sound overbearing in conversation, but better words to use are "intense" or "energetic"- he often elicits a rapid back-and-forth from a conversational partner. In those conversations, he may, as he has often with me, bring up the differences between Chinese and American culture; the inefficiencies in some American customs, for instance, are a frequent refrain. Take eating, for example. He says that nobody in China is so fussy about other people eating off their plate. Everyone just eats, and who cares who's eating from where, anyway? Alternatively, after seeing that I ordered a Peking duck from the Chinese take-out restaurant, he described the real thing from China in terms that I cannot reproduce here. You can see why he might be a willing subject for an interview.

David was born in Hong Kong (3), and lived there for the first six years of his life. For those years, he lived in an expat (short for "expatriate") community, among other long term or permanent non-citizen residents. In his case, those first six years were spent primarily with Americans and Europeans, and in that period he spoke English exclusively (4) (5). That would change quickly however. He describes the year to follow like this:

> *My parents wanted me to be as culturally in touch as I can with Chinese culture, and the best way to go about that is language, and so they moved back to Shanghai, put me in an all-local kindergarden, and in about six months I forgot every single word of English and could speak [Mandarin] Chinese fluently. (4)(5) (13)*

He hardly remembers that rapid language change, saying it was simply a manner of necessity, as the other kids in his class would've had no idea what he was saying if he spoke English (12). He mentions that it has been much harder taking introductory Spanish in college than it was learning Mandarin in kindergarten. Since then, he has picked his English back up from his international schooling post-first grade, and maintains a native-level proficiency in both

languages: “I would say if I only speak Chinese to a Chinese person… he would think I’m Chinese, and I would say the same of an American.” (6)(29). That easy mastery of both languages extends to his mind as well: when he’s in an English-speaking environment, like school, he thinks in English, and when he’s back home in China, his brain seems to toggle back to Chinese (14). For that reason, he thinks of his dominant language as being in large part a product of his surroundings, rather than something rooted in himself (7). It can be Chinese or English, depending on his environment. The possible caveat to this, though, is that the way he uses his languages is somewhat asymmetrical. For instance, “back at home my parents would speak to me sometimes in Chinese, and I would say maybe 70% of the time I would respond with English, just because… it’s easier to do so in English.” (8)(9). He thinks that mostly has to do with the “intricacy” of Chinese- it takes more sounds to say the same thing, in some cases, and so he uses English more often. Chinese is more audience-oriented, he says, and English is more direct.

In addition to being able to adeptly use both languages depending on the context he’s in, David’s brain also seems quite skilled, although not perfect, at switching between the two. He describes the feeling this way:

> *If I haven’t spoken Chinese for a while… it makes it very hard for me to speak, and especially write. It takes me about 20-30 characters for me to get back into it. Sometimes when I’m speaking with Chinese international students, I tend to be in a state where I’m lost for words for at most the first hour, when I’m kinda choppy, and then it just flows (30).*

When he gets emotional, though, he doesn’t seem to need much time to switch. When he’s frustrated on the tennis court, he sometimes curses in Chinese “just because, Chinese curse words, when you say them… it gives you a lot of satisfaction, just because how it sounds is very harsh.” (16). Chinese has other relationships to things in his life. He associates the language with home, his parents, his home culture, his upbringing, and his childhood, whereas English is primarily a “professional language”. (20) He doesn’t seem to think that the professionalism of English impacts his relationships very much, however. It seems to be the case that he associates his language with home, and his loved ones with home as well, but not the case that Chinese fluency is a requirement for him to get close to someone (28). His older sister spoke primarily

English for most of his childhood, for instance, and that is a large part of the reason that David doesn't consider English to be a purely professional language.

When David's languages mix, it is most often in his texting, and in that case he will always write long phrases of Chinese with English words sprinkled in (17). It is exceedingly rare for him to sprinkle Chinese into his English. This goes back to the intricacy of Chinese, in the sense that there are English words that can express an idea more succinctly than a Chinese word can, but there are few Chinese words which are easier to write than their English counterparts. A big part of this is the Pinyin method of typing Chinese, which requires the author to type Romanized characters corresponding to a set of Chinese characters, which the author must then sift through to find exactly the character that suits their needs. This is much more time consuming than using those same letters to simply write an English word, so David defaults to English much more often.

Some parts of Chinese, he cannot substitute with English. The example David grabs onto, for instance, is the vast number of *Chengu* in common use in Chinese today (26). These are extremely short, dense idiomatic sayings in vernacular Chinese which reference a meaningful shared cultural context. They may not make any direct reference to their source meaning, which usually comes from ancient literature, but they do take their meaning from those sources. For instance, there is one such chengyu which translates to "break the woks, sink the boats." This references the Battle of Julu, where the attacking General Xiang Yu ordered that his soldiers destroy their food supplies and ability to escape from the battle, leaving them no choice but win if they wanted to survive[1]. Xiang Yu's soldiers were victorious and for that reason this chengyu evokes a message of winning at all costs. David describes chengyu as "scholarly" and "packed with meaning".

Although David can choose to use *Chengu* if he wants to relate to fellow Chinese natives, he rarely feels pressure to hide that ability. When asked if he has ever chosen to hide his bilingualism, David could only think of one circumstance, and that is when he returns to his birthplace of Hong Kong, because there, the Mandarin David speaks is stigmatized. This is because Chinese tourists visiting Hong Kong who speak Mandarin are very poorly mannered, which causes natives to react poorly to the language, in the style of "You're from the mainland. You're rich, but you have no manners. You just buy stuff and then you pollute." For that reason,

[1] "History - Historical Events." Battle of Julu - China Culture. Web. 22 Feb. 2017.

David, hoping to save himself from being perceived as a mainland tourist, sticks to English in Hong Kong (32). By contrast, David uses Mandarin and acts like a local in Shanghai and Beijing, even when he's with his American friends, because if a business perceives him as a local, they won't charge him as much as they would a tourist, which is how they would perceive him if he used English.

That perception of him as a local in Shanghai is one that David shares. He sees himself as being a child of Shanghai, and belonging primarily to Chinese culture (21). He thinks that's the result of his upbringing. "I feel like if I had grown up in America" he says "it would be very different… Even though I spoke English my first six years, I was still living in a part of China. All of my early memories are of China, Chinese culture, festivals, stuff like that."

He doesn't seem to have any qualms about being raised bilingual, and speaks about it in exclusively glowing terms. While some bilingual people may worry about not having any one identity to cling on to, in David's case, it is very much central to that identity: "Bilingualism means a lot to me, in the sense that it has informed who I am as a person, and informed my identity growing up, and it's an aspect of myself that I'm proud of. It's a family thing that I'm very proud of. I feel like it helps me communicate better... Personally, I'm grateful that my parents gave me bilingualism." So it seems that in David's case that being bilingual, more than anything else, has given him access to interactions, both personal and professional, that he wouldn't have had otherwise. It has opened doors and granted windows. Of course, David can only speak for himself, but he sure can speak.