"How Did You Reach the Advanced Level of Chinese?" --Case Study of Graduates from OSU Chinese Program[1*]

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Abstract
Despite the large number of Chinese language learners in the United States, only a small proportion attain advanced level, which remains insufficient to meet the growing demand for deeper U.S.-China communication. This study investigates the factors contributing to the achievement of advanced Chinese proficiency by examining the experiences of graduates from Ohio State University's (OSU) Chinese program who have reached this level. Through qualitative interviews, the study explores their learning trajectories, reflections on their language education at OSU, and the impact of advanced Chinese proficiency on their careers and personal lives. Additionally, the study revisits the definition of advanced Chinese proficiency and discusses effective strategies for enabling learners to reach this level.

Key words
Performed Culture Approach, advanced Chinese learners, program development

[1*] I would like to express my gratitude to the DEALL faculty and staff for their support in helping me successfully complete my graduate studies, leaving me with wonderful memories. I am also deeply grateful to the teachers and graduates who participated in this research. Without their time and the valuable information provided, this article would not have been possible.

1. Introduction

1.1 Chinese education towards the advanced level in the U.S.

Prior to the September 11 attacks in 2001, foreign language instruction in the United States primarily focused on elevating learners to an intermediate proficiency level. However, following 9/11, the priorities in foreign language education underwent a significant shift, with the goal transitioning toward cultivating learners capable of achieving advanced and superior levels of proficiency. This shift was driven by two primary factors: the growing demand for advanced and superior language users in the context of U.S. national security, and learners' aspirations to take advantage of growing opportunities to use language skills in an era of rapid globalization (Martin, 2015).

In regards to Chinese education in the U.S., both China and the U.S. share a strong interest in cultivating a larger number of American learners who can achieve advanced proficiency in Chinese. Over the past three decades, China's rising global influence in political, economic, and military domains has created an increasing demand for advanced Chinese speakers across various U.S. sectors, including government, strategic institutions, business, and technology. At the same time, China has a vested interest in fostering a deeper understanding of its language and culture among Americans to facilitate cooperation across multiple domains.

To support this goal, both the Chinese and American governments have invested heavily in Chinese language education. On the Chinese side, government-sponsored initiatives such as the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, the Chinese Bridge competition, government-funded scholarships, and study-abroad/exchange programs organized by universities, government agencies, and private organizations have played a vital role in expanding and strengthening Chinese language education. On the U.S. side, programs such as the U.S. Department of Defense's National Security Education Program (NSEP), the Chinese Language Flagship Programs, Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) programs, and the Fulbright-Hays Program have provided training to help students successfully attain advanced and superior-level proficiency.

With the efforts of both sides, Chinese language education in the United States has made significant progress in terms of the enrollment and number of Chinese programs in the past decades (MLA, 2019). However, compared to other foreign languages, learners who achieve advanced proficiency in Chinese remain relatively scarce. This phenomenon can be attributed to several factors. First, the 30-year political isolation between China and the United States from 1949 to 1979 resulted in a lack of public awareness and understanding of China among Americans. Enthusiasm for learning Chinese did not emerge until around the year 2000. Second, Chinese is considered a "truly foreign language" for American learners because "it bears no linguistic relation to English—in other words, it is a non-Indo-European language and is primarily used in societies that contrast sharply with our own culture" (Jorden & Walton, 1987, p. 111). It would take an astounding 8.8 years for a learner to reach an advanced level in a typical university Chinese language program (Christensen & Warnick, 2006, p. 4). Moreover, even if learners reach this so-called advanced level, successful interpersonal interaction and social transaction with native speakers require an understanding of China's cultural codes, which form a system far more complex than linguistic codes alone (Walker, 2000; Jian & Shepherd, 2010; Christensen & Warnick, 2006; Qin, 2017). For American learners, this presents the true challenge of attaining advanced proficiency.

1.2 The OSU Chinese program

From as early as the 1990s, Walker (1989, 2000, 2010) recognized this issue and proposed the Performed-Culture Approach (PCA) to Chinese language teaching. This approach emphasizes culture as the core, performance as the means, and aims to cultivate students' ability to participate in the target-language community in the future.

The OSU Chinese program adopts this teaching ideology. The majority of their language classes are called ACT classes. In ACT classes, students practice handling various realistic situations using the target language, based on what students have prepared for that class hour. FACT classes are conducted mainly in English, with focus on explanation and analysis of the language and how students need to approach practicing it.

The Chinese program includes 5 levels of instruction in three formats: Individualized Instruction, Intensive classroom, and Regular classroom (five hours per week)[2]. The program highlights the importance of pre-class preparation, one hour of class commonly takes an experienced learner two hours to prepare. In terms of teaching materials, they employ authentic and multimedia teaching materials, such as *Chinese: Communicating in the Culture (CCC), Strange Friends* (Chinese movie), and *Spring Grass* (Chinese TV show).

Study abroad summer programs are offered at each level, providing opportunities for students to interact with local Chinese and develop appropriate cultural behaviors. In the 1990s, they built the U.S.-China link program creating opportunities for American students to intern in China and helped a significant number of Chinese learners reach advanced level.

In 2005, they built the Chinese Flagship Program. This advanced-level instruction is available to qualified undergraduates as a combined BA/BS plus MA degree program. It is designed to train participants to function professionally in Chinese cultural contexts. During the first year of enrollment, students take a series of courses at OSU. The second year is spent in China in further training and research in a specific domain of the student's choosing[3].

The Flagship program has designed many innovative courses, such as *Networking in China and the US*, *Negotiation with Chinese*, *Chinese Media*, and *Classical Chinese in Modern Chinese*. All these courses revolve around a central theme: helping students understand how Chinese people perceive the world, history, media, and their own language and culture. The courses also explore differences in concepts and behaviors between Chinese and American cultures in daily interactions and professional settings, preparing students for future engagement with Chinese counterparts.

In terms of faculty, they invite experts from various industries in China, including scholars with different specializations, writers, lawyers, television hosts, and business professionals. These individuals are not Chinese language teachers but experts in their respective fields. Many of them do not speak English or understand American culture, but this is intentional—it aims to create an authentic Chinese community for students, immersing them in an environment where they learn how to interact with Chinese professionals[4].

To graduate from the Chinese Flagship program, students must write a master's thesis in Chinese within their chosen field and defend it in Chinese. For example, Simon (2017) with an Art History major examined Chinese contemporary art by comparing Beijing's 798 Arts District and Songzhuang Artist Village. Smith (2021) with an Environmental Science major assessed

[2] https://deall.osu.edu/programs/undergrad/chinese/objectives-and-means

[3] https://deall.osu.edu/programs/undergrad/chinese

[4] From Interviews with Dr. Walker

Wuhan residents' opinion about and knowledge of Sponge Cities[5]. Moreover, students' Chinese language performance must reach the ACTFL Superior level proficiency before graduation.

Since its first cohort in 2005, the OSU Chinese Flagship program has produced over 100 graduates by 2024. These graduates are currently spread across various industries worldwide, working in fields such as business, education, management, and government.

1.3 Gap statement and research questions

As Truex (2024) observed, at a time of heightened competition with Beijing, the American education system is not generating enough American citizens with Chinese language ability, meaningful lived experiences in China, and deep area knowledge. He believes that the U.S. faces a critical shortage in China experts, which is not healthy for the depth of American understanding of its strategic competitor and appeals more young Americans to learn Chinese and study China.

There is no doubt that studying American learners who have already achieved advanced Chinese proficiency will be highly beneficial in realizing the strategic goal of cultivating more advanced Chinese language professionals. However, research on this specific group of learners remains scarce. One major reason is that this group of learners is relatively dispersed, and the paths to individual success vary greatly, making it difficult to widely apply and promote their experiences. Now that OSU's Chinese program has successfully cultivated a significant number of advanced Chinese learners, their experience will provides invaluable insights for the following questions:

1. What factors motivated them to reach the advanced proficiency level in Chinese?
2. What do they reflect on their Chinese language learning experiences at OSU?
3. How has achieving advanced Chinese proficiency impacted their careers and personal lives?

Research on these questions will offer valuable insights into the development of Chinese language programs, curriculum design, and teaching methodologies. By identifying key factors that contribute to successful language learning, it will help more students reach advanced proficiency in Chinese. This study will also explore ways to better connect Chinese language education with students' future career paths, ensuring that their language skills translate into meaningful professional and personal benefits.

2. Research methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences and perspectives of advanced Chinese language learners in the United States. A case study methodology was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of how learners develop proficiency and cultural competence in Chinese through immersive and instructional experiences. The study integrates semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and participant observations to gather rich, contextual data.

2.2 Participants

The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of learners who have achieved advanced proficiency in Chinese. The study includes:

[5] https://deall.osu.edu/chinese-ma-theses

1) Program graduates – as this is a pilot study, three graduates from the OSU Chinese program were selected: Daniel, Lisa, and Sean. They all completed their undergraduate degrees at OSU Chinese program, then entered the Chinese Flagship MA program. They graduated in the year 2009, 2017 and 2021 and their majors were Chinese, Art History and Environmental Science, respectively.
2) Instructors and program administrators – the former Chinese program director and three instructors who design and implement curriculum participated in this study, providing perspectives about the design of the program and curriculum.

2.3 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using the following methods:

1) Semi-Structured interviews – Conducted face-to-face and online, these interviews allowed language learners to reflect on their language learning journeys, challenges, and strategies, and language educators to provide information about their teaching ideology and experiences. Each interview lasted between 1 to 2 hours and was recorded with participant consent.
2) Observations – Field notes were taken to capture learner interactions and cultural engagement.
3) Document Analysis – Course syllabi, learning materials, videos recordings of learners' presentation and oral defense, their MA theses, and institutional reports were analyzed to contextualize the program's curriculum design and its alignment with advanced proficiency goals.

2.4 Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes. The analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being predetermined. Notta software was used to transcribe interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents, ensuring systematic and transparent analysis.

3. Findings

3.1 What factors motivated them to reach advanced proficiency level in Chinese?

Throughout their learning journey, it is identified that all of them have maintained a strong sense of motivation, though the nature of their motivations varied at different stages.

3.1.1 Motivations at the initial stage

Their initial motivation was often sparked by a meaningful encounter or a personal choice, rather than external pressure. The reasons they initially chose to study Chinese included:

1) Finding Chinese fascinating.

Daniel was drawn to Chinese films when he was in high school: "*It was pretty random at the time. I was very interested in Chinese media, like movies and things like that*."

Sean, who had a passion for drawing, found Chinese characters aesthetically similar to art: "*I thought it was so cool. It turned into a hobby and a passion*."

Coming from an artistic family, Lisa was captivated by the rhythm of Chinese and felt that speaking it was akin to singing: "*Because of the tones, I really identified with that, because it felt like singing*."

2) Practicality:

They all recognized the practical benefits of learning Chinese. Lisa emphasized its global communicative power: "*It is also so practical because I can communicate with billions of people. And I understand a side of the world that so many people don't understand. And to me, that feels very practical*."

Sean said that his high school Chinese studies provided him with an opportunity to attend a military academy, reinforcing the real-world value of the language: "*My senior year of high school, I got an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy. They saw that I spoke Chinese and they wanted me.*"

3) The challenge of learning Chinese (anti-self motivation)

Another interesting motivation was the desire to challenge oneself and stand out. As one of the most difficult languages for English speakers, they were actually drawn to its difficulty, seeing it as a challenge that sets them apart.

Lisa felt that learning Chinese made her unique: "*I felt very special. There were not really many people studying Chinese. Yes, I did hear that (Chinese is really hard), and it made me want to study it even more because I wanted to be special*."

Sean shared a similar sentiment: "*So I think early on, it was something unique, something that would make me stand out*."

4) The influence of good teachers

All three participants highlighted the importance of having supportive and inspiring teachers at the beginning of their learning journey.

Daniel was the only dedicated student in his night school Chinese class in high school, which made him the teacher's favorite: "*I was the only student in that class that cared. The teacher loved me.*"

Sean was so eager to learn that he requested additional homework from his teacher: "*I would ask my teacher for extra homework because I liked it so much. And I was like, 'They're not giving me enough homework. I want to master my characters.' And then she would give me extra credit because I asked for more work*."

Lisa studied Chinese for four years in high school but had to start from level 1 in college based on her placement test. While initially disappointed, she later felt grateful for the strong foundation built in high school: "*I tested into Level 1. I was a little sad, but honestly, I was very grateful because, you know, I think in high school, it gave me a good foundation… I love my high school Chinese teacher. She's the reason why I decided to continue studying*."

3.1.2 Sustaining motivations to the advanced level

While the initial motivations for learning Chinese tend to be similar among learners, as the novelty fades and the language becomes increasingly difficult, only a select few persist to the advanced level. The critical question, then, is how these learners sustain their motivation all the way to advanced level. Through interviews, the following key factors that contribute to their perseverance are identified:

1) Study abroad experiences in China

The three participants all had multiple study abroad experiences during their college years. For them, studying in China after several years of studying Chinese in the United States becomes a pivotal turning point, leading to significant linguistic breakthroughs. These experiences serve as a powerful motivation for them to continue learning, helping them overcome the plateau phase and progress rapidly.

Daniel received a scholarship from the Chinese government and spent his junior year studying in Beijing. Lisa spent nearly every summer of her college years in China, supported by various scholarships. Sean had six study abroad experiences across high school, college and graduate school. He received a Chinese government scholarship to study in China for a year; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022, he had to study online for eight months before finally spending four months in China.

2) Extracurricular experiences

Participation in extracurricular competitions also played a role in sustaining their motivations. Sean competed in the Chinese Bridge language competition during his freshman year which boosted his interest in Chinese learning greatly. Daniel also took part in the competition and received the Chinese government scholarship, which further reinforced his commitment to the language. Lisa successfully passed the highest level of the HSK (Level 6), which gave her an immense sense of accomplishment.

3) A supportive learning community and opportunities for language use

They all mentioned the importance of having a supportive Chinese learning community. Within such an environment, they could actively use and practice their language skills with their Chinese classmates, friends, and teachers, which helps create a "mini Chinese community," providing them with both social and linguistic reinforcement.

Due to time conflict with double majors in Chinese and Environment science, Sean took Individualized Instruction at OSU from Chinese I all the way to Chinese V. But he mentioned there were lots of graduate students from China who speak Chinese in his office. So he kept up his Chinese with them.

"*In college I realize that with me being in the environmental field and working with Chinese folks, it's really important to be able to speak Chinese. It opens up so many doors*."

During his second year in the Flagship program, Sean went to Wuhan University where he built a strong professional network in China. His Chinese academic advisor introduced him to senior researchers and peers, creating an invaluable support system for him.

Daniel used his Chinese Bridge Competition scholarship to enroll in a six-month training program in Communication University of China. He was trying to earnestly see if he could be a host in China or not.

"*I was the only foreigner and all these people from all over the country. Every morning we had four hours to show how standard your Chinese accent is. We're sitting there with a retired CCTV lady, she's with all the students from all over China, practicing z c s or zh ch sh, that's not for foreigners. So I got to see and I got to go in depth*."

He then got an internship at a well-known TV station in China.

"*I think I was the only intern that got a stipend. I think I was the only intern that had housing provided for them, even though I had to live with my boss. We got special treatment for the most part, being the foreign person, less expectations of you. I enjoyed it, but I am cognizant of it. I tried to stay a little grounded*."

Lisa studied at Peking University during her second year in the Flagship program. While immersed in a Chinese-speaking environment, she also had a community of international students, which helped her overcome cultural isolation:

"*When you go and you live there for a year, you're not taking Chinese classes. You're learning your domain area in Chinese. So I was in classes with all Chinese students. I was learning arts management. I took my first Western Art History class in Chinese! I was the only foreigner out of there, among 300 Chinese students*."

3.2 How do they reflect on their Chinese language learning experiences at OSU?

3.2.1 Does culture learning truly matter?

All three interviewees responded affirmatively—culture is undeniably important.

Lisa strongly endorsed the role of cultural learning. To illustrate, she shared a personal story from which she learned the hierarchical culture in China,

"I remember they had a little birthday celebration for me. They brought in a cake, and they cut into pieces. And usually, in American culture, the birthday girl gets the piece of cake first. And I was reaching for the piece of cake, and they were like, no, no, no. Lingdao 领导/the boss, needs to have the first piece. I was like, oh! You know, you don't learn that, necessarily. You have to experience that."

Sean emphasized that without an understanding of Chinese culture, his research in China would have been impossible. When conducting a study that required collecting 300 survey responses from the Chinese community, he had to leverage his *guanxi* (interpersonal connections) to ensure participation.

Daniel clearly distinguishes between the behavioral norms of Americans and Chinese, understanding these cultural differences and making corresponding behavioral adjustments, which has contributed to his professional success in China. He now applies this approach in training his own students:

"Like, Wengguang and Richard are not the same people. So in American culture, you have this tendency to be really talkative and really overbearing and stuff like that. You know, when we took him to Flushing for our immersion weekend in Flushing, Queens, we had to tell him, 'You're Wengguang here.'"

These reflections highlight the fundamental role of cultural understanding in language learning. Language is not just a system of codes; rather, it operates within culturally defined contexts. The Performed Culture Approach effectively prepares students for real-world interactions by immersing them in cultural scenarios that mirror those they will encounter in professional and social settings.

3.2.2 Does performing in the classroom help?

This ability to navigate seamlessly between two cultures with ease in intercultural communication is largely attributed to their daily classroom performances at OSU. In class, they rehearse like actors, repeatedly practicing how to respond in various scenarios they may encounter when interacting with Chinese speakers in the future. These rehearsals go beyond verbal communication, encompassing elements such as physical distance, body language, facial expressions, and other nonverbal cues essential for effective interaction. This type of training enables them to communicate naturally and appropriately within the target-language community, doing so automatically and autonomously in a culturally appropriate manner.

Lisa believes this program focuses on the "right thing" because they are "useful and practical". She stated,

"*The program at OSU was very intensive. The reason why I thought that the program at OSU was so successful was because of that performance piece… Every single day, we had to get up in front of the class and perform a 对话 (dialogue). There was a lot of memorization, putting yourself out there.*"

Sean mentioned, when he was asked to perform the below dialog

"来，抽支烟/不用，谢谢，我不会" [Take a cigarette, please/No, thanks.]

(a dialogue from *Strange Friends*, Level 2 movie class)

in the classroom and he thought that was "stupid" because strangers in the U.S. will not offer you a cigarette. But it really happened when he was building a rain garden in Wuhan. There was a construction worker who offered him a cigarette, and he was able to kindly refuse it with what he rehearsed.

Daniel liked the idea of participating in the target culture,

"*My goal going through school was to become as Chinese as possible. I even dyed my hair black. I mean it was just kind of for fun, but it definitely played into this whole goal of wanting to blend in China, just wanting to be Chinese*."

All the three participants mentioned that they do not feel they are the same person when being called their Chinese name and English name. They have double cultural identities. They follow different cultural norms and behave differently when interacting with Chinese and Americans.

Lisa said that she is a very extroverted person, but in China being called Lisa, she feels "*I think Lisha (her Chinese cultural identity) is a bit more reserved, a little bit more introverted in China. With learning Chinese I'm a little bit more observant, a little bit shier to speak, and I listen a lot more. I'm a little more timid*."

Daniel has two Chinese names. He named himself after a famous character in a Chinese movie when he started learning Chinese in high school. He discovered that Chinese people would laugh and love it when he would tell them his name. So he kept it for many years. But he changed his name into a more neutral one about two years ago. He explained,

"*I feel like my persona, my Chinese-speaking persona has changed. Back then, I was just trying to become as Chinese as possible. I'm not that kid anymore. I kind of went as far as I needed to. And now, to live my normal life, what I'm doing now, I've kind of come back to a happy middle place. I think a lot of people experience cross-cultural communication. So now or later, they're going to meet their point. So you want people to treat you more like a person, not kind of, as we mentioned, a performance monkey or something*."

3.2.3 MA thesis writing

During their studies in the OSU Flagship Program, students are required to choose a domain topic and ultimately complete a master's thesis written in Chinese. The program designers, Professor Walker and Professor Jian, emphasize that this course does not expect or require students to produce theses at an expert level. Instead, the goal is to familiarize students with fundamental concepts and research methodologies in their respective professional fields, teaching them how to conduct literature reviews, engage in discussions with Chinese-speaking professionals, and articulate their viewpoints effectively.

From the first day in the program, students began preparing for this process. They discussed their research areas with advisors, determined their research topics, and learned how to search for Chinese and English literature. Every week, they would meet with their domain teachers to discuss their research progress, present an oral report, and answer questions from an audience composed of members of the local Chinese-speaking community. Through this cumulative learning process, students would complete their theses within two years. By the time they graduate, they were able to independently conduct a one- to two-hour thesis defense entirely in Chinese.

Sean believes that the one-on-one learning model has been particularly beneficial for him, as it allows him to explore any topic of personal interest under the guidance of a Chinese mentor while developing independent learning skills.

"*It was very self-directed, which I liked. One day I'd be talking about 沙尘暴 (sandstorms),and then the next day I'd be talking about engineering ethics, and then the next day the topics were everywhere. I remember I made a slide at the end of the semester about everything I talked about, and it was everything, which was great*."

At the same time, he also engaged in targeted learning related to his domain field, such as acquiring specialized terminology.

"*During my PhD I worked in the soil lab and I wanted to be able to create a document where I walk people through step by step of the verbs, like take the soil, pour it into the vial, put it in a furnace, and burn the soil. I needed to be able to describe very specific verbs and I did that. Before I went to China I made a power point step by step, this is what I want to do when I arrive. Because of that one-on-one and talking about the very specific verbs I was able to go to a lab in Wuhan and test the soil*."

Daniel feels that these weekly reports have significantly improved his oral communication skills. In particular, the requirement to begin each presentation with a self-introduction has proven to be extremely useful. When he later worked in China, he realized that self-introductions were necessary in almost every professional and social setting.

Lisa mentioned that the FLG program helped her become a specialist in her domain, "*There's so many words that I probably will never know or never really be able to use but if I focus on my domain I can become really proficient in that*."

They also pointed out some areas for improvement in the program's instructional design. Sean felt that a clearer framework could have helped him develop a more well-rounded research paper, "*Maybe if I had a little bit of structure, I would have felt like I could have written a more comprehensive thesis*."

Daniel expressed a similar sentiment, stating, "*The thesis would've been great if I knew what I wanted to do*." He emphasized the need for more guidance when selecting a research topic, rather than having students search aimlessly without direction. Additionally, he suggested that instructors should provide more guidance on academic writing standards in the U.S., ensuring that students understand the expectations for scholarly research and thesis composition.

3.3 The impact of advanced Chinese proficiency on their careers and lives

After having reached the advanced level, all three participants have used Chinese for their internship or work intensively.

Daniel had first worked as a television host in China for a couple years and became well-known due to his standard mandarin accent with a foreign face. He then returned to the U.S. and now teaches Chinese at a private school. He stated that without learning Chinese, he would never have had the opportunity to work as a TV host in China. Now, as a Chinese teacher, he takes great pride in his current work:

"It's rewarding. I'm able to use all these skills that I've acquired over the years and pass them along. And it makes me feel smart. I'm teaching doctors, I'm teaching lawyers, and they're struggling with this thing that I have the skills for."

Sean works on environmental policy. His Ph.D. study was about sponge cities in China. Originally he was supposed to be working in China, but because of COVID, he had to redo a different scope. Now he is helping the U.S. and Chinese governments address environmental

challenges and he uses Chinese frequently in his work. His research demonstrates how language skills not only facilitate communication but also open doors to meaningful cross-cultural studies and environmental policy discussions between China and the U.S.

Lisa is currently working in an art museum in the U.S., where she rarely uses Chinese in her job. However, she firmly believes that learning the language at an advanced level has profoundly shaped her personal and professional development. She sees her Chinese learning journey as having given her essential life skills—confidence, cross-cultural awareness, and adaptability—rather than simply a tool for direct professional application.

"Regardless of whether I use the language or not, learning the language at that level has allowed me to have everything that I have. I truly believe that, because it is very impressive on a résumé. People are like, 'Oh, you-- if I can write an 80-page thesis in Mandarin, I can pretty much do a lot of things.' I know that that sounds a little self-centered, but it's true. I think it shows employers that you are cultured, especially in the arts, that you have experience outside of the United States. That's huge in the art world. And it's very impressive. It has allowed me to be a better communicator, a better listener—literally better at everything. I am a much more confident person. It's so much more than just the language. So that's why I don't really care that I'm not using it, because I'm where I am today."

4 Discussions

4.1 Achieving an advanced level of proficiency in Chinese requires a sufficient investment of time.

With the advancement of technology in language instruction and the increasing availability of online language resources, the time required for Chinese language acquisition may no longer be as lengthy as the previously estimated 8.8 years. However, based on the experiences of the three highly committed participants in this study, the standard four-year undergraduate curriculum is certainly insufficient. There are three primary ways to extend the duration of Chinese language learning: (1) integrating university programs with K-12 Chinese language education to establish a continuous learning pathway; (2) aligning undergraduate programs with graduate-level Chinese studies to ensure ongoing linguistic and cultural development, and (3) participating in study abroad programs.

If these three conditions cannot be met, intensive language programs can serve as alternative pathways to achieving rapid language proficiency gains in the United States. Walker (2010) presents a viable framework for accelerating the development of Chinese language in the US. He elaborately introduces how to design an intensive Chinese curriculum and construct Chinese culture in an American classroom, including the instruction of the four skills, listening & speaking, reading and writing, as well as the incorporation of language courses and content courses.

4.2 Motivating Students to Learn

The design of Chinese language programs and curriculum instruction should center on how to sustain and enhance students' motivation for learning. A shared characteristic among the three interviewees in this study is their long-term and persistent enthusiasm for learning Chinese, which once again confirms the well-known principle that "interest is the best teacher." Thus, different measures should be adopted at various learning stages to guide and facilitate students' engagement.

At the beginning level, the primary focus should be on stimulating students' interest. Regardless of whether students are in K-12 education or at the university level, teaching activities should be designed with learners' individual characteristics in mind. This may involve arousing curiosity in younger students, appealing to high school students' desire for uniqueness, or addressing university students' career aspirations.

At the intermediate level, the curriculum should incorporate engaging and immersive activities that enhance students' sense of participation, such as study abroad programs and practical language experiences in Chinese-speaking communities (e.g., visits to Chinatown). Two of the interviewees expressed profound impressions of their participation in the "Chinese Bridge" program, highlighting the importance of enriching activities that provide a sense of achievement. Such experiences enable students to take their Chinese learning to the next level.

At the advanced levels, course design should align with students' domain knowledge and future career development. Gaining internship or work experience in a Chinese-speaking community for a period of time would be an ideal arrangement.

4.3 Incorporate cultural competence into advanced Chinese language proficiency

Traditionally, advanced proficiency in Chinese has been defined based on linguistic code acquisition, as measured by standardized tests such as the HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi), or proficiency scales such as ILR (Interagency Language Roundtable). However, the significance of cultural dimension is missing in the term "advanced Chinese language proficiency". Besides bilingual competence, bicultural competence is equally, if not more, important for American Chinese learners particularly. The socio-cultural contexts of China and the United States differ significantly, and the behavioral norms governing interpersonal interactions in the two societies are fundamentally opposed. While mastering two linguistic systems is a feasible goal for adult foreign language learners given sufficient time, the true challenge lies in understanding the different cultural thoughts underlying communication and adapting one's behavior accordingly.

Since language is a product of culture and culture permeates all aspects of language, the two are inherently inseparable. Language instruction, therefore, should not artificially isolate linguistic knowledge from cultural understanding. If the ultimate goal of foreign language learning is to enable effective communication with speakers of the target language and ensure accurate conveyance and interpretation of communicative intent, then language education must go beyond rote memorization of linguistic codes and direct translation. After all, meaning is not determined solely by linguistic symbols—rather, "culture creates context, contexts provide meaning, meanings produce intentions, intentions define individuals" (Walker, 2010, p.9). What to say, to whom, where, and how to express oneself appropriately are all culturally dictated. This is particularly true for the Chinese language, whose culture differs greatly from American culture. Thus, learning Chinese must involve an understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which communication occurs—an aspect far more crucial than mere linguistic code acquisition.

4.4 The professional dimension of advanced Chinese language proficiency

Another key dimension in advanced Chinese language proficiency is professional expertise. Traditional definitions of advanced proficiency typically provide only a descriptive assessment of general linguistic competence, without accounting for proficiency in professional domains. This traditional assessment criteria risks misleading learners by setting an incomplete learning objective—one that lacks direction beyond language acquisition. Instead, mastering Chinese should not be the end goal; rather, the goal is to use Chinese to accomplish social and

professional tasks. To this end, Chinese proficiency must be integrated with career development and professional expertise.

A truly advanced Chinese learner should be able to use the language confidently and effectively in professional settings. Ideally, learners should acquire expertise in a field beyond Chinese language studies—such as international relations, international business, biology, or computer science—so that their Chinese proficiency can support their career aspirations. Therefore, while supporting students in enhancing their Chinese language and cultural competence, it is equally important to provide them with career guidance and future planning resources. This requires collaboration among educational institutions, government agencies, and industry stakeholders to align the supply of advanced Chinese language professionals with societal needs. Doing so ensures that learners can apply their hard-earned Chinese skills effectively in their careers, rather than letting them go to waste.

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