

Episode 23: Learning Chinese

Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about learning Chinese. Wendy explains why she decided to start learning Chinese, why she likes it, and why it's different from other languages.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are talking about learning how to speak Chinese. Uhh, so it will be mainly you who will be talking, but before we get into that, a little-known fact is that we once made a deal that I would learn Chinese and you would learn Russian.

Wendy: Yep.

Nick: And it was at a time when we hadn't been to China or a Chinese-speaking, uhh, country, uhh, or to Russia or to a Russian-speaking country, but we thought in our travels that that was going to be quite a big part of the years to come and so we made this agreement. And I'm not sure how we decided who got which language.

Wendy: No.

Nick: Umm, but I think I was quite interested in Chinese so I said, "OK, I'll learn Chinese." Uhh, and then we found out that we were going to go and live in China, we had a work project that we were doing there and we would be spending about six months in China. And so I started to learn a little bit of Chinese. I had a book with an audio, uhh, set as well and I was doing a little bit of Chinese. And I made a little bit of progress, still very much at the beginner level. Umm, but then actually when we got to China, then I started working full-time and I just didn't have the motivation - even though we were in China, so it would have been very useful to continue and to improve - umm, I just didn't have the energy to come home from work and study Chinese, basically. And so that was the end of my brief experience with Chinese.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And then we found that China became a big part of our lives for a while, because the following year we went back to China and we had about three more

months, again related to a work contract that we were doing there. Uhh, and it was then that you started learning Chinese.

Wendy: I did, yeah. So, the first ... our first trip to China was in Beijing, we spent about five or six months living and working in Beijing and, uhh, we were working with lots of Chinese people but they all spoke English very well. So even though it would have been very useful to ... for us to know Chinese, we were able to get by¹ in Beijing without it, you know. And whenever we ran into a problem² in a shop or something trying to communicate with someone, we would just call one of our English-speaking Chinese colleagues and pass the phone over, and we would get through it somehow.

But when we went back the next year, umm, we were based in Guangzhou in the south but then we were also spending a lot of time travelling and the very first, uhh, travel ... you know, first trip that we took in China when we were just travelling for fun and not working was to a very remote province, uhh, in kind of the west of China called Gansu. Uhh, which is ... doesn't see very many tourists. Umm, looking back in hindsight³ it was maybe not the best choice for our first trip because we didn't know what we were doing and, you know, it's not where most tourists go and we didn't realise how difficult it was going to be to communicate. Umm, but it was extremely difficult. And so I started learning Chinese just purely as a survival skill. At that point I was still studying Russian and I wanted to focus on Russian so I wasn't really interested in learning Chinese for fun, for the pleasure of going through the process of learning, but I just needed some Chinese, I really needed to speak some basic Chinese. And so I studied and I found that even learning a few words made a huge difference. It made it so much easier and so then I learned a little bit more and a little bit more and then I got hooked on it⁴, and I really loved it. And, uhh, continued to study for years after that.

Nick: Yeah it's funny because I think originally you said that you didn't really like the sound of it.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: But then you changed your mind completely and then you really liked it.

Wendy: Yeah, it's true. Yeah, I mean, and I can still remember kind of what it sounded like to me back then when I didn't understand it at all and it was just

¹ to get by: to manage, to do OK without being super successful

² ran into a problem: a problem arose or came about

³ in hindsight: looking back at a past situation knowing what we know now

⁴ I got hooked on it: I became addicted to it, I got really into it

sounds. And, yeah, it ... the sounds were kind of grating⁵. It's very different from English because it's a tonal language and we don't ... English is not a tonal language. Umm, so yeah, it just sounded very strange to my ear and it sounded loud, it sounded like people were always shouting, and I wasn't attracted to the sound of the language. But now I really am. Now I love speaking in tones. I think it's really fun!

Nick: And so what exactly is a tone? Because a lot of languages, or certainly the languages that Western people are familiar with, don't have tones.

Wendy: Well, if ... you're probably familiar with the concept of tones from music. Umm, so Chinese has four tones, so I'll just use, uhh, the sound *ma* as an example because, uhh, *ma* can be, well, four or five different words, at least, probably more, but it's a different word depending on the tons that you use. So, it could be pronounced as *mā*, or it could be *má*, or it could be *mǎ* or it could be *mà*. Alright, so those are four different tones: *mā*, *má*, *mǎ*, *mà*. Umm, and those mean completely different things. One means mother, one means horse, umm, and you really have to get the tone right in order to be understood.

Nick: And that's another great challenge of people learning Chinese is also related to written Chinese. And so if you look at your example of *ma*, if it's written in the Westernisation of Chinese script, or the ... in the Latin alphabet, which is called pinyin, then it looks basically the same.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: It's the m-a, and then there's some accents on some of the letters.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: But to someone like me, that seems like that's the same word even though it's four different ones. But one of the things that you always say was really important in your leaning of Chinese was that you embraced⁶ Chinese characters early on and really wanted to learn the Chinese characters.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And then you begin to think of words as characters and then you are able to separate the different tones into different words.

⁵ grating: unpleasant or irritating to listen to

⁶ embraced: accepted despite their difficulties

Wendy: Right, uhh, yeah, and I think that, uhh, the book that you were using when you first started studying Chinese, it didn't teach the characters at all. It just spoke ... it just taught spoken language and so it just used pinyin, uhh, to teach you and I don't agree with that method. I think it is really important to learn the characters and I'd even say that it's important to learn not just how to read the characters but how to write them. Uhh, even though in practice⁷ you don't really need to write things out by hand much these days, because, well, if you're typing on a computer then you can use a kind of pinyin input system, but in order to ... the learning that you do by writing and learning all the different strokes⁸ and the order of the strokes, you have to get that deep into it in order to really see it and see all the different components and be able to recognise all the different characters individually, because there are so many of them and a lot of them look very similar, umm, kind of at first glance. So in the beginning I just learned how to read and I thought that would be enough, uhh, but eventually I realised that if I was going to get to a high level I needed to learn how to write as well, because that was the only way to learn how to read well enough to really advance.

Nick: And so, in the end, what would you say is the level that you got to when you were at the peak of your Chinese powers?

Wendy: Oh dear. Umm, well, I mean, I took the official exam which is called the HSK, and I passed the highest level of that which is HSK 6. So, you know, that's supposed to be the equivalent of C2 in the European, umm, system. It's supposed to be, you know, the highest level that you can get to without being a native speaker of the language. Now, I don't know if I would say I was ever really at that level, but I was more or less fluent. I could definitely hold a conversation about lots of different topics. Unfortunately that's not the case right now. I have lost a lot of my Chinese and that's something that I've noticed with Chinese more than any language is that if I don't practice it every day, I forget it really quickly, which is a shame because I haven't been practicing every day for the past couple of years or so now, and I really need to get back into that habit because I don't want to lose it completely. Umm, even though it's not my main focus right now and I'm doing lots of other things, it is important to just carve out⁹ those 10 or 15 minutes to practice a little bit.

Nick: And like you said once, that, learning Chinese is, essentially, a lifetime adventure.

Wendy: It is, yeah. You'll never be bored again once you start learning Chinese because you'll always have so many more things that you can learn, whether you decide you want to pick up traditional characters in addition to simplified characters

⁷ in practice: in reality (the opposite of *in theory*)

⁸ strokes: pen or paintbrush movements (in this case)

⁹ carve out (phrasal verb): to set aside, find time in a schedule

or, you know, if you want to start learning about Chinese opera and then learning all these new characters that come in in this, you know ... because it's a different way of speaking that they used in the opera. Like, there are just so many facets¹⁰ to it, so, yes, it is a lifelong adventure.

¹⁰ facets: parts, aspects

Comprehension Questions

1. Why did Nick start learning Chinese?
2. Why did Wendy start learning Chinese?
3. Why does Wendy think that it's important to learn how to write Chinese characters?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. At first when I moved to Switzerland I had trouble with the cold weather, but eventually I _____ it.
2. Everything was going really well with our work project but then we _____: we didn't have enough funding to continue.
3. When she first graduated from university she couldn't find a good job. She worked occasionally as a babysitter just _____.
4. In theory, that's a great idea, but I'm not sure that it will work _____.
5. I must try to _____ some time this weekend to do my taxes. I've been putting them off for ages.
6. At first he seemed one-dimensional, but now I'm seeing that he has a few different _____ to him.
7. My friend told me about Pokemon Go and then _____. I spent hours playing it every day.
8. Many people find the sound of fingernails on a chalkboard very _____.
9. She travelled to Morocco by herself when she was 21. _____, that wasn't a great idea.
10. She has beautiful handwriting. You can see how perfect all of her _____ are.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Would you like to learn Chinese? Why or why not?
2. If a language has a different script from your native language, do you think that makes it more interesting to learn? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever been 'hooked' on a language the way Wendy was with Chinese where you want to study it as much as possible?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Nick started learning Chinese because he and Wendy made a deal that he would learn Chinese and she would learn Russian, and also because they were going to live in China for a few months.
2. Wendy started learning Chinese because she found that travelling in remote areas in China was too difficult without being able to speak any Chinese.
3. She thinks learning how to write characters is important because it helps you learn how to read them, which in turn helps you advance more in your speaking.

Exercises

1. embraced
2. ran into a problem
3. to get by
4. in practice
5. carve out
6. facets
7. I got hooked on it
8. grating
9. In hindsight
10. strokes