Interpreters voices: Lynette Shi

A conversation with a veteran Chinese/English interpreter about biculturalism, discovering one's vocations in life, conference interpreting and teaching.

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Lynette was born in Nanjing but spent much of her childhood in Switzerland, attending the International School of Geneva through middle school. In 1966 her family returned to Beijing where she later undertook undergraduate studies in Chinese language at Peking University, and was among the first graduates (1981) of the UN Interpreter and Translator Training Course at Beijing Foreign Studies University.

So it was back to Geneva and a fulltime interpreting job at the UN until 1985. Later the desire to learn led her to pursue an MA in Communication Studies.

For the last 20 years she has combined teaching and freelancing in both the USA and China. Recently she became the first Chinese colleague to sit on AIIC Council.

I met Lynette in the early 90s and once even sublet her Monterey flat when she was on sabbatical and I was a visiting professor at the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS). Our paths have crisscrossed ever since. When her name was mentioned as a possible interviewee in this new series, I enthusiastically agreed and got in touch with her.

LL: Did you choose or stumble into interpreting? Was there a specific incident or period in your life that may have pushed you toward your future profession?

LS: A bit of both. Quite early on, I was "exposed" to the profession. My father, a doctor, was an international civil servant working for the WHO in Geneva back in the 1950s and 60s. In those days there were very few Chinese in Geneva, so I clearly remember Chinese interpreters from the UN in New York visiting our home for Chinese meals, whenever they came to Geneva to work for the series of conferences that were held at the end of the Indo-China War in the mid-1950s. In those days, there were no Chinese interpreters based in Geneva, so NY sent people over quite frequently, and I heard about how they worked and what they did. However, I wanted to be a doctor, and that ambition continued until 1966, when my family returned to China. Shortly after, the Cultural Revolution began and all schools closed. I started to study Chinese in earnest at home, and realized that I was going to have a lot of trouble learning chemistry, biology and mathematics in the language! Visions of me in a white coat faded.
My first job was with the foreign language journal *China Reconstructs*, in the French section, and that's where I first began to "seriously" work with languages. I realized that I quite liked doing this, and that I was also quite good at it. By 1978, after the PRC resumed its seat in the UN, the need for Chinese interpreters in the Secretariat became urgent and the Beijing UN Training Course was organised. Again I heard about this through my old UN friends who were involved in the planning, and I decided to take the selection examinations. These were pretty tough, three series of exams in all, that whittled an initial field of 600 down to 25, 15 translators and 10 interpreters. Prior to this, I had started to do some informal interpreting for foreign language movies that were being shown unofficially. There was no proper sound equipment, my "feed" was the public address system in the hall. I was seated right in the front at a desk, and had to speak through a microphone over the original soundtrack. I never knew in advance what the film was about and frequently could not follow the fast dialogue. But I got better at it with practice, and found I could often guess and anticipate dialogue and plot, which meant paraphrasing and explaining as well as interpreting. I found it all quite exciting, though stressful, with several hundred people waiting impatiently behind me to hear what the film was about. As part of my work, I also did some consecutive interpretation for my boss, and that too whetted my appetite.

**LL:** What have you found most fulfilling in your work? Does any one memory stick out in your mind?

**LS:** My sense of fulfillment from being an interpreter comes from two interrelated aspects of the profession. The first is a personal one. I find interpreting full of challenges, to the mind as well as the body, and I rather relish a challenge! I get huge satisfaction out of understanding the original, with its associations and innuendos, twists and turns of logic, rhetoric and diction, and then in trying to find the "right way" of conveying all this in the target language. When things go well, I have a great sense of elation, since I have proved to myself that I have the skills, the intellect and the knowledge to perform such an intricate process. Of course, this does not mean that I am always pleased with myself, but that sense of "perfection missed" too is part of the challenge that is exciting. One always knows one could do better, which is both frustrating and stimulating.

The other aspect is the role that interpreters play. I am deeply aware of the cultural and linguistic divide for my specific language pair, of the deep biases and stereotypes that exist, and hence of the crucial role good interpretation plays in helping to bridge that gap. We say all the time that we are intercultural communicators, but I think *knowing* is not enough; one must *feel* this with a sort of passion to become a really effective interpreter. Of course, this does not happen in all situations, and there are indeed plenty where one just needs to get the message across as accurately as one can. However, even in some gatherings dealing with pure administrative or specialised content, there is still a chance to convey the undercurrents expressed in the speakers' voice and tone, which can result in a more empathetic, understandable rendition. I'm a firm believer in the axiom "the better the interpretation, the more invisible the interpreter." I think there is nothing more fulfilling than to see the gleam of understanding and connection in the eyes of the listeners, in the case of consecutive interpretation; or to sense the seamless comprehension of the give-and-take during a smooth simultaneous interpretation.

One more recent memory sticks out in my mind. I was working for a specialised conference on the conservation of ancient heritage sites and during the coffee break, one of the speakers in the previous session came up to me to thank me for my interpretation, saying that he knew it must have been good because of the quality of the questions he was asked at the end. He also remarked with pleasure that this was one of the first such conferences he had attended in which he understood what all the others were saying. I was gratified but also a bit disturbed. The organisers of the event were so pleased with the interpretation team that we were invited up on to the stage (we had been in the booth on the floor above) for a round of applause and presentation of gifts. This had never happened to me before, or since!
**LL:** Why did you go into teaching?

**LS:** Actually, this is where I stumbled into things. After I came back from Geneva in 1985, I returned to my job as translator and reviser at my journal. The Director of the UN Training Course asked me if I could come over once a week to give tutorials for Chinese into English interpretation, since at the time they had no native English speaker on the faculty. I found I really liked the experience. A couple of years later, when I went to the University of Hawaii to get my Master's degree, I taught part time in the Center for Interpretation and Translation Studies, mainly to earn some money to pay my way. Professor Arjona, who was the director at the time, taught me a lot about curricula, syllabi, assessment and pedagogy. After I completed my degree, I tried to find work in the field of communication, but failed. Later again, I learned that MIIS was looking for a Chinese instructor for the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation, so I applied and was hired as a visiting professor. That eventually became a permanent faculty position.

**LL:** Interpreters: born or made? What aptitudes do you think are essential?

**LS:** I believe interpreters are made. However, certain aptitudes make it easier "to be made," if you see what I mean. An ease with languages is a given, but I also think that a curiosity about language, expression and communication is helpful. Powers of association are terribly important, and I think those stem from curiosity about people, culture, and knowledge. After many years of teaching, I notice that some people are just naturally more curious and inquiring than others, but I do believe interests can be awakened and fostered. Some are naturally more analytical than others, but again these qualities can be trained and honed. I see this in myself and how I have become much more analytical and logical over the years, thanks to deliberate study and effort. We always say that resourcefulness is very important for interpreters, but I believe that it comes with a lot of practice, experience and richer resources of language and knowledge. One cannot expect too much at the beginning.

**LL:** Have you noted any changes in students in the last 10-15 years (e.g. background, preparation, language ability, etc.)?

**LS:** Yes, though it's not that easy to pin down. Students seem to know a lot of things, probably thanks to the internet, but in fact they are not as well grounded or as well read as those from former years. This not only affects the depth of their knowledge but also the quality of their language. There is also a marked desire for "shortcuts," that is, quick solutions, quick retrieval of information without too much digestion or analysis. It's so easy now to "cut and paste," yet without thought and analysis the result is not necessarily good. However, I also find students much more participatory, willing and eager to speak up, more "enlightened" about other cultures and social phenomena, also probably due to the internet and availability of audio-visual materials. They are also extremely tech-savvy!

**LL:** Is public perception of interpreting (and interpreters) any different in China than in the USA or Europe?

**LS:** Public perception of interpreters in China is that they do an amazing job. However, there is similarity in the misconception that anyone with some foreign language proficiency can do it. And now with these internet translation tools (which result in hilarious/awful translations) one doesn't even need that! Clients are pretty much the same everywhere, they always want top quality work for the lowest price! Those that regularly use interpretation know that they need to pay for well-trained interpreters, but there are now some who see having interpretation as a "status" symbol, and will hire less qualified people who do a poor job and smirch our reputation. A lot of client education is still needed.

**LL:** Is the PRC market as big as some claim? Is there really a need for thousands of new
interpreters in China?

**LS:** Not necessarily high-level simultaneous conference ones, but definitely for ones who have the skills for bilateral business meetings, for escort situations, for training workshops, etc. I believe that most interpreters will find their "niche" at some point. It will take time for individuals to work out what suits them best. Of course, the money is a huge attraction for all young interpreters, if they can get the high-paying freelance jobs. Many will probably end up as bilingual office workers who are called upon to interpret from time to time. Government offices at many different levels (provincial, municipal) need some interpretation, but not necessarily full-time. Businesses, especially ones with foreign trade interests, all need some levels of interpretation and translation. At this point, many who work in these offices are graduates in foreign languages, but have little or no interpretation skills or training. I believe there is a big need here, and this is why I have been teaching at summer courses organised by the Training Center of the China International Publishing Group.

**LL:** Reverse cultural shock: does it exist?

**LS:** Yes, I think it does. I know that a constant source of discussion amongst the alumni from each graduating class of the International School of Geneva is precisely the difficulties many encounter when they return to their home countries after an "international education" in Geneva. I wrote about the topic in the alumni paper 35 years ago, and I understand that at the last alumni reunion in July 2009, it was still a hotly debated issue. I know that most of my own classmates had varying degrees of reverse culture shock when they returned to their home countries for college. Some found that they could not stand it and returned to Geneva where they felt more comfortable with the international environment there. In my own case, it was more just plain culture shock when I came to China, since I had never actually lived here until then. But for many people who return to their home countries after some time abroad, the shock is, I think, the greater for being unexpected. No one ever thinks they are going to have difficulties fitting back in. They probably also underestimate the degree to which they have been influenced by their stay abroad.

**LL:** If not interpreting... what field would you have liked to pursue?

**LS:** Knowing what I know about myself now, I think I should have studied to be a horticulturist. I find growing plants very satisfying, a bit like teaching.

**LL:** Retirement: does it exist for a translator/interpreter/teacher?

**LS:** No, not really. I think we T&I people have very portable skills that can be useful everywhere at any time of our life. The internet has made this even more so for translators. Our focus might change somewhat, we may become a bit more picky with our assignments, less willing to take on topics that interest us less, or work in modes that we find less congenial. I know that is how I feel about things now. For years I did not wish to translate anymore, but I am coming back to it again, and enjoying it very much. Perhaps that's because I can now pick and choose what I wish to spend time on, instead of just rushing to keep a deadline. I enjoy teaching very much, the students keep me alert, flexible and engaged, but I think one can get a bit burned out from the constant repetition, homework, testing, and evaluation. So I prefer teaching in short courses. I hope to continue this until either my energy runs out, or my employer feels I am too out-of-date with nothing useful to teach.

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**Recommended citation format:**
