

Regional

Lavallee teaches and studies Chinese culture

China has become an economic superpower, influencing more and more world events. No wonder the ability to both communicate with the people of China, and to understand Chinese culture has become increasingly important in many aspects of American politics and business. And while we use the word Chinese to describe the language, the fact is that there are so many languages and dialects that many Chinese people do not speak each other's language.

"There are officially eight major dialects in China," said Tom Lavallee, an associate professor in the department of foreign languages and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. "Different regions in China have their own distinct dialect, and even at a finer level when you move from city to city within a province you'll have more different kinds of emphasis that is placed per word." He has experienced these complexities himself.

"It was 1990 when I made my first trip to the People's Republic of China," Lavallee remembers. "I was in a bus, it was a summer and there were vendors selling watermelon. As the bus would stop and pick up more people, the vendors would come to the bus and ask people if they wanted to buy a watermelon. The word for watermelon, as we kept going farther and farther away from Nanjing and into the mountains, the word started to change to the point that when we got to the mountains, I knew it was watermelon but I didn't know what they were saying."

Born in Holyoke, Mass., Lavallee obtained two bachelor's degrees, one in Chinese and another one in English literature from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and a master's degree in Chinese literature and doctorate in Chinese and comparative literature from Washington University in St. Louis.

Today the most widely used dialect in China is Mandarin, the one used most



Photo courtesy of Chen Yan

Dr. Tom Lavallee in Fujian Province, Tulou Historic Site.

often for official business and commerce. It is also the one taught in most schools. And if you don't think it is a complex language, just consider that you need to know about 4,000 different characters just to be able to read a typical newspaper.

Because of the growing importance of China in the modern world, we see how the study of the language has become more and more popular in colleges and

universities. But that does not mean that it is an easy language to learn.

"For a lot of students it is exciting, and for some it's intimidating," said Lavallee. And a lot of what I do as a teacher is to try to reduce the intimidation factor and provide them with certain sets of skills so that they can take what seems to be something very different and break it down in ways that allow

them to develop familiarity." Lavallee said that the way he teaches Chinese is as a process, allowing students to not only learn the language but their own way of processing the language.

"A lot of what I'm doing in the first year is asking them over and over again, 'How are you learning? What's going on in your mind?' in terms of how they are processing the language and try to

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identify what kind of learners they are," he explained. Beyond understanding the language, the art of writing the Chinese character makes you feel that you almost have to become an artist to do so.

"Yes, that is one aspect of the language," said Lavallee. "It really is an art form. In ancient times how you learned about another person could very well be done through the analysis of calligraphy. It exhibits the person's character." After the first semester of Chinese, Lavallee's students come out with a rudimentary knowledge of the language.

"We have as a goal that we are going to have under control at least 150 characters," he said. "Because after the first semester they are not only learning the character, they are also learning the Romanization system called pinyin. That's the basic way to capture the sounds of Chinese using the Latin alphabet." As a Westerner who has been to China many times, Lavallee summarizes the major cultural differences between Chinese cultures and Western ones as complex – yet somehow familiar.

"A lot of times when I am in China, places that I often visit are very Westernized, like Shanghai, Beijing, and other big cities and urban centers," he said. "But if I were to isolate and maybe highlight differences, definitely there are two areas that come to my mind: Family and food. Those two areas are very fun to talk about."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.