

# Translator's worlds of wisdom



Shanghai-based Canadian interpreter Andrew Dawrant

Meet the Canadian who likes to stay in the background — translating the speeches of the world's top leaders into Chinese. And, as Sam Riley discovers, his words mean business.

## Editor's Note:

This weekly series focuses on individuals who have lived in China for a while and have a tale that's worth telling. Age, gender, nationality and race are all unimportant in comparison with what adventures the subject has been up to, the experiences they can recount. Get in touch with a tip about a China story that deserves to be told. (features@shanghaidaily.com)

▶ **Andrew Dawrant**  
**Nationality:** Canada  
**Age:** 38  
**Profession:** Conference interpreter

▶ **Q&A**  
**Description of self:** Ambilingual, communication, warrior.

**Favorite place:** Mock conference room, where I get to train the next generation of simultaneous interpreters.

**Strangest sight:** Invasion of noisy TV commercials into taxis (lobbies, elevators, etc)

**Worst experience:** Crossing the street.

**Motto for life:** Engage with integrity.

**How to improve Shanghai:** Mandatory availability of seatbelts in taxis, Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese).

**Advice to newcomers:** Make local friends.

**H**is voice has been heard in a live address to more than 300 million Chinese and he has sat at the shoulder of world leaders — but Canadian Andrew Dawrant says if he's doing his job well, you shouldn't even notice him.

Dawrant is one of the world's most sought-after English-Chinese translators. The Shanghai-based expert has interpreted for official visits to China by the president of the United States, the prime minister of Canada, the president of the European Commission and the CEOs of many Fortune 500 companies.

His interest in Chinese languages began when he started teaching himself Cantonese at the age of 16. His interpreting career includes simultaneously translating into Chinese former US President George W. Bush's 2002 address at Tsinghua University, which was broadcast on CCTV to an audience of hundreds of millions.

Dawrant says people listening to the broadcast of Bush's address did not realize it was a foreigner providing the translation — such is the standard of his Chinese.

Dawrant also provides his services for ministerial meetings of the United Nations, G8, World Bank, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), World Economic Forum (WEF), Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and others.

For top interpreters at this level, it is vital that they have an extensive general knowledge but also have sufficient technical background in the subject matter they are interpreting.

"We faithfully interpret what people wish to communicate to each other and simply facilitate a completely transparent dialogue," he says. "The ultimate goal of interpreting is for us to be invisible,

to allow two people to speak as if there is no language barrier."

Dawrant's hometown of Edmonton, capital of the western Canadian province of Alberta, seems an unlikely place for a high school student to begin breaking the Chinese language barrier.

However, Edmonton has a considerable Chinese population, having been the destination for many Chinese migrants during the 1980s.

With a British father and an Argentinean mother, it wasn't until he gained a part-time job at a local school that Dawrant first made contacts in the city's Chinese community.

The school had a large number of migrant students and Dawrant initially bought a Cantonese book to learn basic words and phrases.

His initial foray soon grew into an obsession with learning Cantonese and it wasn't long before he was spending much of his spare time practicing Cantonese with the grandparents of the children he would look after.

At just 16, Dawrant decided he needed to accelerate his learning and went to Hong Kong by himself for three months.

Originally staying in the local

YMCA, Dawrant had a crash course in Cantonese culture and society.

"People would ask me to stay at their homes. I stayed with all strata of society — from blue-collar workers with factory jobs to artisans who made ivory carvings and even a family who lived on the top of the Peak who were bankers," he says.

On completing high school he was virtually fluent in spoken Cantonese and Dawrant gained his first interpreting job assisting Chinese migrants access government services at a community services center.

At university he also started studying Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese) and was the only foreigner in a class of Chinese who all spoke another dialect and had elected to study China's national language.

Dawrant topped the class and went on briefly to study at Heilongjiang University in north-eastern China for three months before returning to Canada.

During his university course he also read the news in Chinese for a college radio station, taking lessons from a former Chinese broadcaster who also studied at his university.

Later, a chance meeting on a plane with a top-level international

conference interpreter convinced him to move into high-level language training.

The interpreter recommended one of the world's most demanding Chinese-language programs at Fu Jen University in Taipei. Dawrant describes it as "special forces training except for linguists" and out of the class of just seven people, only three passed the first year.

"It reconfigures your cognitive apparatus permanently," he says. "The way you listen, the way you access memory, the way you construct meaning and the way you mediate between languages is permanently altered."

First interpreters have to learn analytical listening skills, and then practise consecutive interpreting.

"Most people have never listened with 100 percent focus to someone speaking. We tune in and out listening for new information or interesting things," he explains.

Consecutive interpreting is where an interpreter can listen to a 10-minute talk and then deliver that speech in full in another language, maintaining the tone, nuance and interest of the original speech. In the second year of the course, students learn simultaneous interpreting.

After completing his study, Dawrant gained a job with the Canadian government working at interpreting almost every kind of conceivable meeting that needed Chinese-language skills.

Since coming to China in 2000 he has built a company, Sinophone Interpretations, that specializes in English, Chinese, French, Japanese and Korean and works on business and government meetings, events and talks across China and the Asia-Pacific region.

As well as providing interpretation services, Dawrant also has a major role training China's



Andrew Dawrant (back) shares a joyful moment with his staff.