

## Luck – It Depends on How You Look at It

By Michael Chang on March 16th, 2011

An old Chinese folktale is told in my family:

*Lieh Tzu tells a little story of a Farmer who lives with his son on a mountain. They owned a horse. One day, the horse ran away. They neighbors came to show their sympathy because of the loss. “Why do you think this is bad luck?” the Farmer asked.*

*Later, the horse came back with several wild horses. This time, the neighbors came to congratulate him. “Why do you think this is good luck?” the Farmer asked.*

*With several horses around them, the Farmer and his son took to riding. One day, the son fell from his horse and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to show sympathy, and again the Farmer asked them why that should be bad luck.*

*In the following year, there was a devastating war and thousands of able-bodied men died. Because the Farmer’s son was injured, they were spared.*

The lesson I took away from this parable? In life, there are no such things as luck or adversity; success or failure. It all depends on how you look at it.

I grew up as an immigrant in America. I was in grade school and spoke no English when we moved to Northern California. When I found out about the overseas move, I was horrified. My immediate reaction was dread; I dreaded leaving my friends.

As a teenager, I often was teased by the kids at school about my non-native, heavily accented English. My sympathetic English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher tried to comfort me with assurances like, “You know, you don’t really learn the language unless you learn it in ESL.” And, so encouraged, I began to absorb bits and pieces of my new culture by watching cartoons like Bugs Bunny — a character produced by the same motion picture studio where I now work. And through learning English as a second language, I discovered that I was good at languages.

I graduated in mid-1990 when the economy was just recovering from a downturn. In those days, when you applied to law school and then graduated, “you get what you get, and you don’t get upset,” to quote a nursery school mantra. Nowadays, the bar has been raised and there is an even greater number of qualified law school

graduates competing for fewer positions. This makes it important to distinguish oneself not only with traditional indicia of success but also with something personally unique.

As a law student, I followed the “usual” path — I got accepted to the law review editorial board, published articles, clerked for a federal judge, worked at a large firm, published more articles and, my annual billable-hour quota permitting, , volunteered at pro bono programs that supported diversity in hiring, the well-being of the elderly, and other worth-while causes in the local community..

But, from there, I took a risk, and my path diverged from that of the “typical” associate. I not only went in-house at a relatively early stage of my career, but I moved to a rural area in a country that, back then, was relatively foreign to me. On top of that, I joined an emerging, foreign IT company consisting, by and large, of non-English speaking engineers. I was one of a handful of English-speaking employees — the others were either English teachers or interns. I realized that, by making this move so early on in my career, I could be sacrificing a lucrative position as a ‘big firm’ lawyer, possibly partner. However, being young and somewhat myopic, I didn’t want to (and couldn’t) wait to find out if the big law firm was the path for me.

I was going after my dream: to do something that didn’t come naturally, and to become knowledgeable in a long-held passion: Japanese culture. I did learn as much as I could about my chosen field — the consumer electronics and consumer products business in Asia — by working closely with and absorbing knowledge from people who have more than 20 years of experience in those fields.

At first, not speaking the language — yet physically resembling a Japanese national — I was teased about my “foreignness.” This brought back memories of grade school. As bad as the experience seemed at the time, however, being immersed in the Japanese culture turned out to be fortuitous. At some point during my seven-plus year stay in Japan, I realized that I had achieved a fairly high level of fluency in three languages: Mandarin Chinese, English and Japanese. I also found that being multilingual gives a lawyer, particularly an in-house lawyer who is part of a global team of professionals, a competitive advantage.

Twenty years later, I now feel at home in any negotiating environment, in Asia and the U.S. I regularly review, in multiple languages, Batman branding style guides, Tom and Jerry trademark filings, Harry Potter marketing materials and websites, and Looney Tunes licensing contracts — providing significant cost-savings to my employer. From both a personal and a career perspective, being the non-native English speaker has allowed me to make a figurative “return trip” in bringing American entertainment to Asia. And it has provided me the knowledge and the wisdom to be adept at leading and managing people of different cultures.

Looking back, my ‘foreign’ background not only became a career advantage, but it also enriched my life. Luck really depends on how you look at it.