

A Matter of Interpretation

By Jennifer May, Julia Bentley and Charles Reeves

When Canada hosted the APEC Summit in Vancouver in 1997, DFAIT enlisted liaison officers from around the globe to assist representatives of the member economies attending. The three of us made up the team working with the Chinese delegation. Julia was a political officer in Beijing, and Jennifer and Charles were doing intensive Mandarin language training. Little did we know just how much of an education the Summit would be!

One of our tasks was to find out what side events our delegations were planning, so that security arrangements could be made and motorcades readied. The Chinese held this information very closely. On the last day, we caught wind that all three of the Chinese leaders—President Jiang Zemin, vice premier and foreign minister Qian Qichen and trade minister Wu Yi—would attend the opening of an exhibition of Chinese art at the Vancouver Art Gallery. On short notice, Minister of Foreign Affairs Lloyd Axworthy also decided to go, not least to give “face” to these senior guests.

The leaders took their places before a crowd of several hundred, listening to speeches in Mandarin, Cantonese and English. Much to our surprise, President Jiang took the floor and delivered some remarks in Mandarin, translated by his interpreter. It then became clear that Minister Axworthy also intended to speak. Who would translate? The Chinese interpreter’s duty was to translate only for her leader. The Minister’s protocol officer turned to Jennifer. “Get up there!” he whispered. “You’ll have to translate.”

With 14 months of training under their belts, Charles and Jennifer thought they had made pretty good progress. But they were definitely not up to interpreting for the Chinese president. Julia was unceremoniously pressed into service just moments before the Minister took the podium. She does not remember exactly what he said; what she does recall is the challenge of having to guess at the correct Mandarin translations of the Cantonese names of the Chinese-Canadian organizers.

The Summit’s most memorable moment for Julia came when President Jiang, overhearing an exchange among security officers, spoke up in excellent English to insist that he had no problem walking past a crowd of demonstrators.

For his part, Charles will never forget being asked on short notice to escort Minister Wu on a shopping excursion to buy ladies’ clothing—not a contingency anticipated in the Summit liaison officers’ training.

As for Jennifer, she shared a laugh with Vice Premier Qian when, after a couple of days of showing him through doors and into motorcades, he finally asked her why she kept following him around. She had originally been introduced as the person giving him his security pin, not as his liaison officer. That, too, was probably a matter of interpretation.

Jennifer May is currently the political program manager in Vienna, Julia Bentley is the political program manager in New Delhi and Charles Reeves is associate chief of protocol and director of official events.



Summit souvenirs: Jennifer May's APEC 1997 security pass (top); Julia Bentley translates for Lloyd Axworthy (middle) and stands with China's President Jiang Zemin (bottom) at the APEC Summit.