

Why Mr Lee is learning Chinese – in India!

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*(This feature article, about a Chinese-origin man in Mangalore who is now learning Chinese – from an Indian tutor in Bangalore – in order to connect with his extended family in China, was **published in DNA** edition dated October 17, 2010. I loved writing this story at many levels: the intense drama in Mr Eugene Lee's life, and what it says about language as a bridge across cultures.)*

Venkatesan Vembu



Eugene Lee, a Chinese-Indian, is learning the language of his Chinese father - from an Indian tutor in Bangalore.

For four weekends last month, Eugene Lee, 46, a Mangalore-based, ethnic Chinese restaurant owner, joined a handful of Indians at a language school in Bangalore and grappled with the tonal complexities of the Chinese language.

For Lee, who speaks fluent Kannada, Konkani and Hindi (besides English), proficiency in Chinese will come with an emotionally stirring reward that relates to his mixed heritage – his late father was Chinese, his mother was Mangalorean. Learning Chinese, he hopes, will open the door to reconnecting with a side of his father's family in China, which was hidden behind a bamboo curtain until three years ago, when a visitor from a faraway land unveiled the mystery.

“Three years ago I learnt for the first time that my father, who had come to India from China in the 1930s as a circus artist and married my Mangalorean mother, had children from an earlier marriage in China,” Lee told *DNA*. “I showed a visitor from China the

letters in Chinese that my father used to receive until he died, but which I could never read because I didn't know the language, and he translated them for me.”

Stunned by the secret laid bare by the letters, which pointed to the presence of an extended paternal family in China, Lee traced, with help from associates in China, his father's Chinese children from that other marriage. And in 2007, Lee even travelled to Hebei province in northern China to meet his one surviving step-brother – a 77-year-old – and several of his father's grandchildren from that branch of the family tree.

“They were very happy to see me,” recalls Lee, “but I had one overwhelming regret: that I couldn't speak any Chinese, which was the only language they knew!”

To overcome that linguistic lacuna, Lee enrolled last month for the 40-hour beginner Chinese course offered by the Bangalore chapter of the [Chinese Institute of Chennai](#). He travelled every weekend from Mangalore to Bangalore, and thanks to the strenuous efforts of his tutor Arun Gorur, Lee says he can speak “a smattering of Chinese”. He now hopes to build on that by enrolling for the advanced course, where he will also learn Chinese characters, the building blocks for reading and writing in the language.



N. .Balakrishnan, founder of the Chinese Institute of Chennai.

“I'm planning to travel to China next year to meet my father's extended family again,” says Lee. And brimming with confidence, the ‘Chindian’ says he hopes to be able to speak to them in Chinese, learnt from an Indian in Bangalore! Lee's 17-year-old son also plans to enrol for a hotel management course in China, and bring back authentic

Chinese cuisine recipes that he can introduce in the family's chain of Xin Lai Chinese restaurants in Mangalore.

Gorur, who lived and worked in southern China for three years from 2002, says it was a "rare privilege to teach the Chinese language to a person of Chinese origin in India!" And the fact that his tutorial efforts will help Lee make an emotional reunion with his extended family in China made it doubly special, he adds.

Chinese Institute of Chennai founder N. Balakrishnan says that the intersection of his institute's path and Lee's life story validated, in a sense, his endeavour to see Chinese language education as a bridge between India and China. Given the prophesied economic rise of both the countries, it was important for people from the neighbouring countries to understand each other.

"If we are now teaching Chinese even to Chinese-origin people in India, perhaps we are on the right path!" adds Balakrishnan.