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Feature Article

U.S. Actor's Filming and Cultural Experiences in China

"You've got a lead American role," the casting agent in Los Angeles who was working for the Chinese producers tells American actor Lance Johnson.

The retired corporate president who took up acting has been in film, TV, stage, and national commercials in the US, "but I was worried about acting in China, with the language and all," he remembers. In just ten days he will have to fly to China to begin filming a unique China TV series for six weeks. Then outdoor scenes will be shot in New York City and Los Angeles to add authenticity to the Chinese production he auditioned for a month ago.

"This is something new for China," the casting agent speculates, "perhaps part of China's desire to foster better relations with the US." The series portrays the cooperative effort of the two countries to stem heroin traffic between Asia and the US that flows through China. The character Johnson will play is a respected retired CIA agent with worldwide connections who is asked to head the China-USA team to catch an illusive drug dealer codenamed Butterfly. "Interesting twist," he says while learning more about "The Operation Without Borders" and his character.

Then he is told the series has a famous Chinese writer and a director with 18 Chinese Emmy awards. And there are two Chinese movie stars, Qing Pei, who was the young rebel in the classic 1966 Steve McQueen movie "The Sand Pebbles," and heartthrob Wen Zhao Lun. It will be filmed mostly in English with Chinese subtitles, another first for China TV. This relieves some of his concerns about working with Chinese-speaking actors. This radical approach suggests to him that China might release the series in the US as part of its apparent outreach campaign.

Pleased he would be in the CCTV1 28-part series, reality quickly sets in. First things first. Hurrying home from the casting agent's office, he logs on to the Internet to get visa information and learns he will be able to pick up his documents just two days before leaving for China. He also does a Google search on Kunming, the city where he will film for three weeks in early September before moving on to Beijing. With a population of 4 million, this capitol city of the southwest province of Yunnan, just north of Vietnam and Thailand, was the exit city on the fabled Silk Road centuries ago. Called the Eternal Spring City, its 1900-meter elevation on the southeastern flank of the Tibetan plateau affords a pleasant year 'round climate. This is good news to Johnson. Two years before he taught at a university campus in Suzhou, an hour's drive outside Shanghai, where stifling August heat and humidity in the canal-rich area sent 500 residents to the hospital each day.

Not only could Johnson expect better climate, he learns on the Internet that Kunming is full of history and sightseeing opportunities. In just a few weeks he will visit a museum that features individual

headshots of youthful WWII American pilots who saved millions of Chinese lives six decades ago. He will see a tribute to Claire Chennault, their American leader whose volunteer Flying Tigers (so named by the Chinese for their courage) fought the Japanese to guard the lifeline Burma Road, Rangoon and other strategic locations in Southeast Asia and western China. Touring the museum, he will remember his wife's uncle who as a US soldier witnessed horrible death and destruction while building the vital Burma Road—the sole access to China in the '40s. The names of over 2200 Americans who lost their lives in this campaign are inscribed on a black marble wall. Given the strained relations between the two countries dating back to 1949, the actor will be surprised by this tribute to Americans. This will be one of many cultural lessons he will learn during his stay.

Johnson's interest in China did not begin with this TV series. Besides teaching and traveling in China, Johnson had written a book, "What Asians Need to Know About America, From A to Z" (ISBN 7506024640). In fact, the book would be published by China's Oriental Press in early 2006, a few months after he returns from filming. He wrote the book in part because he witnessed the difficulty his Asian American friends in California had adapting to American culture. And in earlier travels throughout Asia, particularly Viet Nam and China, he was astonished by the curiosity Asians had about all things American and their desire to practice their English with him. Sitting in a lounge on the last night of a two-week cruise from Beijing to Bangkok several years before, he decided to finally write his book. Down the left side of a cocktail napkin he wrote the letters of the alphabet that would correspond to the chapters in his *A to Z* book. After each letter he named the chapter: Business for B, Etiquette for E, Grammar for G, Legal for L, Speech for S and so on. He filled up the napkin in two minutes. That blueprint hung on the wall in front of his computer for 25 months as he wrote *A to Z* to help Asians better understand American culture, its people, and its language. The book would receive many endorsements, including one from China's ambassador to the US and the US ambassador to China.

So, not a stranger to China and its culture, Johnson was, however, a stranger to China filming.

The Air China flight to Kunming took 19 hours. Because many of the scenes must appear to take place in the US even though they are filmed in China, he was directed to bring clothes from his closet. After a day's rest from the flight and a 16-hour time difference (China has one time zone that's set on Beijing time), Johnson meets Director Gu and the wardrobe woman and they select the clothing to be used in his scenes. When he returns to the US the following month, he would notice she had written his name in Chinese on the little tags on his ties. "This brought back fond memories of the China crew. It was a beehive as they scurried about on the set with total dedication," he says. He remembers, however, an affable young lighting man who died from eating poison mushrooms he had picked in a field, something common in China. "We were like a family...it was difficult to act that day...so sad."

The director and crew only spoke Chinese, so translators were used both on and off the set, something Johnson had to adjust to. Sometimes a translator (some of who were Chinese college students) didn't accurately convey to Johnson the nuances the director wanted, so some scenes were re-shot two and

three times. On his days off he had a translator/driver as they explored the city, museums, restaurants, stores, foot massage parlors, and busy outdoor markets. He could not recall seeing a movie theater on days off, knowing the government censored films, publications, TV and the Internet. He especially enjoyed the hilly countryside filled with temples spared during the Cultural Revolution of the '60s and '70s that destroyed many ancient shrines and cultural beliefs. More cultural contrasts.

Being a student of cultural differences, Johnson was fascinated with the Chinese people. Often he would just sit and watch them, intrigued by their morning chi gong exercises (which he took up) and afternoon musical instrument playings by hundreds of people in the parks, something never seen in the US. "The Chinese are much more group oriented," he says, "total strangers exercising and making music together and having a good time." He especially enjoyed walking around Kunming watching youngsters stop and stare at him, perhaps the first Westerner they had seen, perhaps the first blue eyes. He remembered Chinese youngsters on a previous trip asking for permission to touch his wife's blonde hair. In a few weeks he would learn the Chinese term used to affectionately describe his type: long head—a Westerner with long head and blue eyes.

Suspicious are raised about Johnson's wealthy character, a retired government official who travels in limousines with bodyguards. The first day is spent filming those limousine scenes. And the first thing he learns about US and China filming differences is the way clothing changes are handled. He recalled a national commercial he filmed several years prior near the ocean outside Los Angeles where he and three actors had a luxury trailer stocked with snacks and drinks and where they made clothing changes and makeup was applied. In China, the black Lincoln limousine stops on a wide, busy street 15 minutes outside Kunming. The small wardrobe van packed with clothes follows close behind the motorcade. Lance steps out of the limo and changes business suits outside the rear of the van. He chuckles as he stands there in under shorts as cars pass by. He once embarrassed the crew when he jokingly waved at passing cars...he was hurriedly helped on with his clothes. Similar changes take place in other public places. Once he changed in front of Kunming's city hall where a sign attached to one of the massive marble pillars read "U.S. Supreme Court." "I got used to it," he says with a smile. "Spectators watched the shooting and the wardrobe changes. And at times I waved to the lovely Chinese people watching me. I love them...they are so friendly and good natured."

Because smoking in China is prevalent, the crew lit up on the enclosed sets, even during filming. Johnson admits that whatever he asked for he got, but he quickly learned smoking was not negotiable, so he used eye drops frequently. In the US, smoking is frowned upon and even illegal in many places, another cultural difference that he discusses in his book, along with many others.

Johnson also had to adjust to Mandarin stage direction. In the US, a director might use words like ready, camera, action and cut. Johnson initially had difficulty discerning the Chinese words used to begin and end scenes as the director sat behind a TV screen several rooms removed from indoor filming. As Johnson became better at learning the Chinese words, the director also became better at

yelling “AWK-SHON” for “action” and “KOTT” for “cut.” After a week the director had such fun using his newly acquired English words that he used them from then on.

Johnson noticed subtle differences between Chinese and American acting methods. He studied Chinese films on TV at night and saw how some Asian actors use more dramatic facial expressions and body movements than Americans are used to. The Chinese actors seemingly adjusted to Johnson’s style of acting, or, maybe he adjusted to them. Either way, it worked out. After all, he says, that is the theme of the series: We can work together for a common cause.

Johnson had a few scenes with Chinese-only speaking actors, but it was not the problem he had anticipated. The natural flow of their words, facial expressions and actions made it easy for him to begin his lines when they finished, and vice versa. The producers searched for local English speakers to fill some of the background and small speaking roles. The best source proved to be local universities that had students from the US and Europe, including London, Moscow, Frankfurt, and Amsterdam. Some had no acting experience but all spoke English and were willing to give it a try. “They all did a great job,” he says.

The original script was written in Chinese and translated to English with some difficulty. Johnson corrected his lines to eliminate repetition and clichés to make the dialogue more natural, more American. “Americans are more direct in their speech,” he says, another topic in his book. Many of the clichés painted a picture of how Asians view America—popular views that he said were simply not accurate. In his *A to Z* book, he tries to present a true picture of America to let the reader draw his or her own conclusions about these myths, such as Americans not liking Asians and the belief that all Americans are rich.

Only on a couple of occasions was Johnson asked to reinsert lines, words, or actions he dropped because the director felt they were important for the Chinese viewer. One scene opened with Johnson sitting on his patio inspecting the ear of his grandson who was played by an American sixth grader from the northern state of South Dakota whose father was teaching in China. Johnson explained to the director this is something we would not see in a US movie. Told that ear inspecting is a common practice in China, that was how it was filmed. He had learned another cultural difference between the two countries.

Filming continued in Kunming for three weeks. Johnson was sometimes on the set 12 to 16 hours a day, and once until 3:30 a.m. and then resumed at 8 a.m. There are no union rules. He had ten days off before filming was to begin in Beijing. One of his scenes, which was filmed on a new golf course high in the hills overlooking Kunming, convinced him to play on that course. So, on an off day, he golfed and seldom saw more than a dozen players on the empty course—something he’s never seen in the US. Golf is a relatively new sport and too expensive; the average monthly wage is 900 yuan—about \$110. He paid \$150 to play on other recently opened magnificent courses with equally dramatic clubhouses.

With the exception of golf, most everything else is inexpensive in Kunming, perhaps one-eighth US prices: a half-hour on an Internet café computer 2 yuan—17 cents, a one-hour foot reflexology massage \$3.50, a four-course meal about \$3.50, and a half-hour taxi ride \$4.00. Beautiful modern villas around one golf course sold for \$400,000. Johnson says something comparable in Southern California would sell for at least \$2 million. Tempted by thoughts of living in China someday, he examined the sales literature and noticed an American real estate firm was marketing them. He would learn in a few weeks that everything is much more expensive in Beijing, just as bigger cities in the US are more expensive, too.

After a few more days of downtime that includes a visit to stunning Yunnan Stone Forest outside Kunming with purplish-grey stone pillars that look like a forest, Johnson then takes a one-hour flight north to industrial Chongqing, China's largest city, which is situated on the Yangtze River. Japanese forces were unable to invade this remote city during WWII, so China produced its armament there. Then after the war, Ford and others carried on with manufacturing in this heavily industrialized city of 32 million people today. He learns that status symbol Buicks have always been a favorite of the Chinese dating back to the 1920s, a time when the country's last emperor had two of them.

Bustling porters have a good time as they use ropes to lower luggage down the steep slopes to the dock as Johnson boards a seven-day cruise down the Yangtze, China's historic lifeline river with 750 million of its 1.3 billion people living within its close proximity. Traveling downstream on one of the world's busiest waterways (the same cruise going upstream takes two days longer due to the river's force), he notices more similarities and differences with the US. The Yangtze divides China's north and south just as the heavily traveled Mississippi River in the US divides east and west. But during shore excursions he notices people in the northern latitudes tend to be shorter and heavier than those he had seen farther south, and Mandarin Chinese spoken in the north is not understood by those who speak Cantonese Chinese in the south and vice versa. Even though the US and China are similar in geographical size, the US does not have these geography-based variations, he points out, then says with a smile, "Except for some New Yorkers who are hard to understand."

Going down three brightly illuminated locks packed with an assortment of vessels (he decides not to go to bed in order to watch), he is awed by the sheer size of the newly constructed Three Gorges Dam that will eventually back up the river 600 kilometers to Chongqing. He visits abandoned villages where nearly two million residents along the river were moved to higher ground as the water rose to 135 meters above sea level; by 2009 it would be at capacity, 175 meters. The world's largest hydroelectric source will not only control millennium-old flooding, but will meet ten percent of China's rapidly growing electricity needs and allow some air polluting coal burning power plants to be closed down. Johnson seldom sees blue skies during his cruise, due in part to ever-present coal and crop burnings. But cruising down the river, he is awestruck by the array of magnificent bridges crossing the Yangtze—"engineering marvels," he calls them, "ribbons of concrete and steel." He

remembers as a little boy building bridges out of toothpicks and glue, none of which had ultra-modern sweeping lines he saw before him.

Near Shanghai on day seven, Johnson leaves the 100-passenger two-decker ship and takes a train to historic Suzhou. On the way he sees massive industrial parks built in the middle of nowhere, most of them empty—China is planning for the future. And newly constructed freeways that have few cars on them, just like the empty golf courses; again, planning and building for the future. More cultural differences.

In Suzhou he is to meet with his students he taught several years before on the university campus. They are Chinese teachers of English. He remembers they did well on his grammar tests but had difficulty constructing correct sentences. Like most Chinese who deal with Americans, they adopted American names that sounded somewhat like their Chinese names. Suzie, who had been his assistant, picks him up at the train station in a new Toyota. Two years before, she had never driven a car; now she owns one, something that is occurring throughout booming China. (For now, only 1 in 100 Chinese own a car, compared to 9 in 10 in the US.) And none of his 45 students, he remembers, had ever been in an airplane.

Johnson treats his former students to a dinner buffet at the elegant Marriott Hotel. Some teachers drive bikes and motor scooters in the dark for over an hour to get there; others take buses, sometimes making two or three transfers in sprawled-out Suzhou. They have never experienced an American-style buffet. He still smiles when he thinks about the many times each went back for more food, sometimes four and five times with dinner plates brimming with newfound Western food. Afterwards, he realizes that an American buffet was too expensive for them—over ten percent of their monthly salary of about \$250. He was glad he afforded them this treat. Another cultural lesson.

In Beijing, Johnson's hotel was next door to the massive construction project for the 2008 Olympics that leveled block after block as far as the eye could see. Construction work continued throughout the night and sometimes disturbed his sleep. So he visited a hotel four blocks away and examined a brochure that showed it had rooms comparable to the one he was in. A bellboy took him up to examine a room—it was dismal looking. He returned to the front desk and asked to be shown a room similar to the one displayed in the brochure. "They said they didn't have one like that. It was an enticement, all for show. Honesty ethics vary widely between our two countries," he says, another topic in his book. The government spent over \$160 billion for the Olympics that all of China rightfully takes extreme pride in. Americans still talk about the thrilling closing ceremony they watched on TV that took place in Beijing National Stadium, a stone's throw from the hotel where Johnson remained.

Construction was rampant and lifestyle changes were coming fast everywhere in China that Johnson went, just as changes were coming to its TV. He says the national bird of China should be the giant crane with outstretched arm used to construct skyscrapers. They are everywhere. In contrast to just 30 years ago, China—by Western standards—was backward during the Cultural Revolution. "In the US,

if our economy grows three percent a year we are delighted. China is now growing at a ten percent clip. In many cities, it's just like being in the US, something I discuss in my book," Johnson says. Then he stops to think. "...except for the heavily traveled roads in Kunming and other smaller cities where horse- and donkey-pulled carts vie with bicycles, cars, trucks and buses." He points out the rule of the jungle prevails on the streets: big vehicles have the right-of-way, while pedestrians are at the bottom of the rung, even lower than bicycles—the exact opposite of the US. "It's a game of chicken among the vehicles," he notes, "as they jostle for space on the crowded roads with blasting horn honkings. We saw accidents every day. I held on for dear life in some taxis. I will never complain about New York City cab drivers again." Another cultural lesson learned.

Filming continues in Beijing, home to most of the cast and crewmembers. Several days of shooting take place in a new upscale housing development that looks like Any City, USA. Again, he is surprised by the low home prices in the gated community, especially the ultra modern house he filmed in with a wine cellar. This is where Johnson's character meets a surprise ending while sipping wine in episode-28.

The crew then flies to New York and then to Los Angeles to film outdoor scenes, including the Los Angeles city hall that appears frequently in US TV programs and films. There, Johnson exits a limousine and walks up the steps by a sign that reads "Washington, D.C. DEA headquarters." Again, he changes clothes outdoors in the parking lot across the street while people in office buildings look on. "No big deal," he says, "by then I was used to it...but I didn't wave."

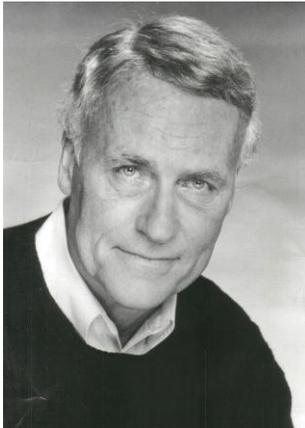
Johnson describes his experience in China as a richly rewarding one and the Chinese people as "gentle, happy, caring and very interested in America." He wishes all people in the US and China could come together and learn more about each other's culture. "Despite our differences, we have so much more in common," he says, "and we must learn to show a common respect."

In endorsing Johnson's *A to Z* book, Zhou Wenzhong, China's Ambassador to the US writes, "I greatly appreciate your efforts in sharing with other people your opinion and experience on the exchanges between different peoples and cultures. It is so important for us to better understand each other while striving to build a better world for all." And Clark T. Brandt, Jr., US Ambassador to China writes, "Your book covers a broad range of topics that I am sure many people in Asia will find very useful. I certainly agree with you on the importance of mutual understanding which your book serves to promote."

Johnson's *A to Z* book, which will be published in English in India this year, and the TV series that is now available on DVD, may help Asians understand a little bit more about America. But he would also like to consult with Chinese companies and organizations to teach them about the American business model, culture, and language to help them succeed in their dealings with Americans. "There are vast differences," he says. He has started writing his next book, "What Foreigners Need to Know About America, From A to Z" for the non-Asian reader. And yes, he says he looks forward to

returning to China to act and teach. He also wants to help Americans know more about Asians. His plate is full, just as the plates of his teachers were that night in Suzhou.

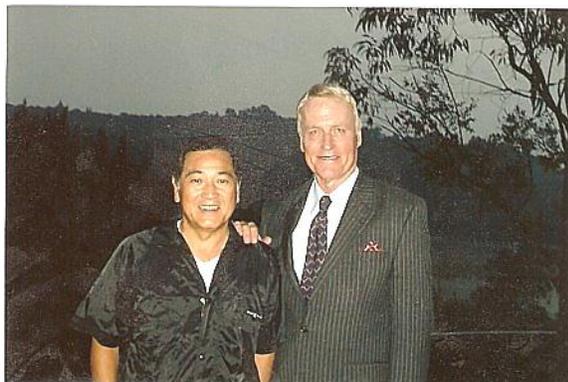
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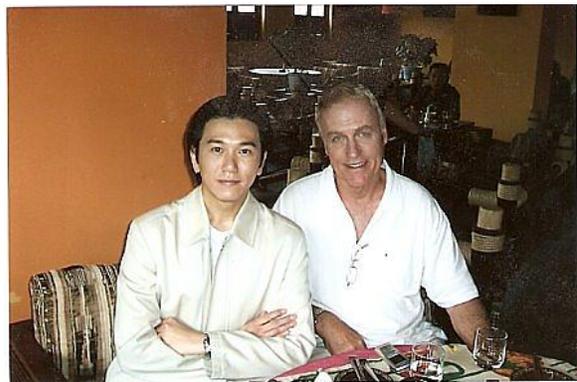
Actor/writer Lance Johnson



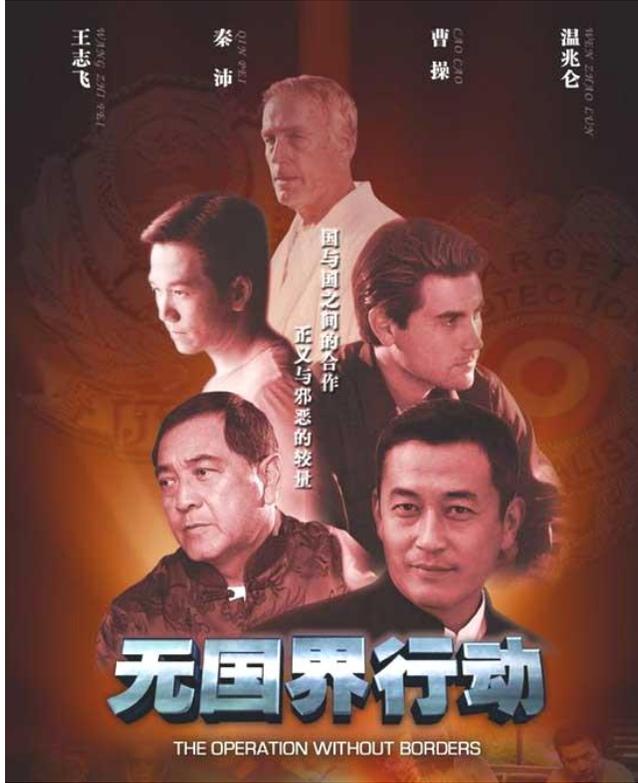
Johnson on filming break at Yunnan Stone Forest outside Kunming,



Johnson on set with actor Qing Pei.



Johnson with actor Wen Zhao Lun on lunch break.



Johnson cruising canal outside Suzhou.

