Teaching Meaning and Finding Meaning in Life in China

Priscilla L. YOUNG
Peking University HSBC Business School, China

Abstract: Human beings make and find meaning on several levels, as we are intrinsically driven to do so in order to experience life satisfaction and sense of fulfillment. In this auto-ethnographic paper, I share my experiences as a communication and English teacher in China, helping students to understand and express meaning. This basic level of working with meaning has led to higher levels of meaning in discussions inside and beyond the classroom with scores of students, positively affecting not only my students but also myself. In contrast to considering language and communication meaning in my professional arena, I share my higher level personal search for meaning, after making radical career, relationship and personal life changes to become a sojourner in China. The paper concludes with the realization that working with the different levels of meaning in different life arenas has repurposed and brought wholeness to my life, validating that meaning is what makes life worth living.

Keywords: Belonging, communication, culture, culture shock, identity, intercultural communication, meaning, meaning in life, social roles, teaching

1. Introduction

What do you mean?
It means a lot to me.
What is the meaning of life?

At the risk of sounding clichéd, meaning is everything. This just seems a tacit understanding – as long as you are comfortably ensconced in your own culture. And even then, there is lots of room for interpretation of words, ideas and events depending on the context. Yet, my interest in meaning since I moved to China in June 2012 has become a preoccupation. "Meaning" has a lot of meaning for me these days. First, there is the professional domain. As a lecturer in the MBA program at a graduate business school in China teaching business communication in English, incorporating intercultural communication into coursework and skills development seminars, and editing research papers translated from Chinese into English, my days are largely occupied with helping non-native English speakers make sense of and make sense with language. Then, there is the personal domain. This ranges from the expected plethora of acculturation challenges to deeper issues of existential angst. It is in this arena that I often find myself preoccupied with questions about meaning in life. Therefore, this paper is divided into four parts, with the first a brief overview of meaning. Next, is the professional arena, in which I discuss my approaches and experiences as a teacher to help non-native English speakers negotiate meaning in English and improve their skills. The third section focuses on the personal domain, in which I treat my

personal exploration of meaning in life in China. In the final part of this paper I discuss how my professional and personal experiences fold into each other, integrating, for me, a broad spectrum on the meaning of meaning.

2. A Brief Overview of Meaning

Meaning is about connections, beyond the physical, symbolic (Baumeister & Vohs 2002; Stillman, Baumeister, Lambert, Crescioni, DeWall & Fincham, 2009; Ventegodt, Andersen & Merrick, 2003). Myriad examples emanating from U.S. American culture come to mind: Love is most frequently the meaning for committed relationships between two people who intend life partnership; the green traffic signal means that the driver or pedestrian has the current right-of-way; "gay" no longer means "happy," and; speech and the freedom to use it is a central idea in US American democracy.

More closely examining the significance of connection and its relationship to meaning, let us look at a basic human need, to belong. Stillman and Lambert (2013, p. 3) describe belonging as "the experience of relational intimacy or group membership" and posit that it is fundamental for human survival. They cite Baumeister (2005) who traces back that as human beings developed social groups, in order to function within them they had to possess the ability to deal with systems of meaning. Of course, these social systems are embedded in culture. And it is culture, the system of norms, values and beliefs (Chen & Starosta, 2005) that ascribe meaning to living entities, objects, words and ideas. These may be different from one culture to another. Thus the reason for pointing out that the examples for various meanings in the first paragraph related specifically to U.S. culture, although certain objects, such as traffic signals, may be universal.

Yet, why do we attach so much importance to meaning? It is a truism that human beings do not like change, yet everything changes. Therefore, according to Baumeister & Vohs (2002, p. 610), our predilection for meaning is how we attempt to bring stability to our lives. In so doing, we are constantly negotiating three levels of meaning. Low level meaning is "concrete, immediate, and specific…whereas high levels invoke long time spans and broad concepts". For example, as I study Mandarin I am learning vocabulary and how to structure sentences. My immediate goal is to solve problems, such as to ask where the washroom is or to request a glass of water. Indeed, if in the U.S. and asking for the location of the place where I need to relieve my bladder I might ask where the bathroom is. Yet, in most other cultures, that is the place where one bathes the body and it would make no sense to the person one asks. Further, in the U.S. when I ask for a glass of water it is served either cold or at room temperature. Yet in China, water is served hot or at least warm, in keeping with traditional ideas on health, so either I need to specifically ask for cold water or just be satisfied with the cultural norm. My intermediate interest is being able to engage in simple conversation with Chinese people. At the higher level of meaning, I desire to develop a mature understanding of Chinese culture, fully accessed through understanding the language. Yet even more important at the higher level of meaning is to be able to connect with others and to enjoy more friendships than I currently do (because these have been established on my terms, that others must speak English).

As Baumeister & Vohs (2002) point out, it is within the higher level of meaning that

human beings experience satisfaction in life and feeling fulfilled. Indeed it is the higher level of meaning, "the will to meaning," that concerns Frankl (1984, p. 121), who states, "Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives". Indeed, scholars have developed methods to assess human beings' concern with the quality of and meaning in their lives. For example, Ventegodt, Andersen, and Merrick (2003) administered their Danish Quality of Life Survey to 10,000 Danes. Steger, Frazier, Oishi & Kaler (2006) developed the Meaning in Life Questionnaire. Stillman et al. (2009, p. 2) cite a number of scholars who have researched such issues as life satisfaction, work enjoyment, happiness, positive affect, hope, and how feeling that one's life has meaning impacts health and well-being.

Baumeister & Vohs (2002, p. 610) posit that there are four components to meaning in our lives: life purpose; values; efficacy, as in feeling that one can make a difference; and self-worth. The authors discuss the term "making meaning" (p. 613), whereby human beings reflect upon and interpret or revise events, most often to make a negative into a positive. As part of the process, people seek attribution for occurrences to make sense of what has happened. "It is God's will," and "I guess it was something I said" are examples of common attributions. As to what underpins the human need for meaning, Baumeister & Vohs (2002, p. 613) conclude that "the seemingly universal development of meaningful interpretation also suggests that human beings are hardwired to meaning". Frankl (2002, p. 131) states it another way: we all have our own "specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment".

Krause (2004) brings identity theory to the discussion of meaning in life, citing the significance of social roles and role identities. One's place within a group, such as mother or sister or aunt, underlines social roles, whereas one's role identity is found in how a person thinks of him- herself or in making a self-introduction. People have multiple identities, and as Krause (2004) points out, with each role comes a set of social expectations that inform how the individual should behave and what he or she should expect. "These normative expectations are important because, as Thoits (1991, p. 287) points out, they are a major source of meaning in life".

3. Meaning in My Professional Arena

3.1. Background

I could not fully appreciate the difference between U.S. American and Chinese educational systems and teaching approaches until I began my sojourn in China. However, I had a preview when teaching a required composition course for a semester at a U.S. university in which I had five Chinese students. Three had only arrived a few weeks prior and two were in the second year or beyond. They were stereotypically silent in class, respectful (so refreshing), yet diligent in their work. To provide extra help outside of class, I met with most of them one-on-one or in twos. Face to face, the students were quite willing to talk and earnestly wished for guidance in order to do well. During the initial meeting, they validated that their silence in the classroom was because of fear of embarrassment due to their self-perceived inept language use or providing inadequate responses in class. I was struck by their sincerity but also concerned

about how nervous and unhappy they seemed. I tried to encourage them to relax a bit, that it would all be fine in time. But, they insisted that their mandate was simple: to be successful. Failure was not an option. The students told me about the cultural emphasis on education back home, long school days, and parents' strict enforcement of homework first. "We had no choice," they said about suffering through school. Education was a serious business, with little fun to be had. The students shared that the teaching style primarily was lecture and tests; asking questions was not encouraged. So, to participate in a US American class discussions in which thoughts, ideas and feedback were expected – and not in their native language – was a new experience for the students, and it was intimidating. I would not learn about the emphasis on test scores and the dreaded "Gaokao," China's grueling national college entrance exam, until I lived in China. But what I learned in my brief experience teaching these students served me well as I applied for and landed a job at a graduate-level university in China which commenced in June 2012.

My first job was a one-year grant-funded position as a language coach in a lab overseen by a professor in one of the science colleges at the university. The only such professional there, I had a desk in the lab, which the 15 students treated like their home away from home. The professor encouraged a family-type atmosphere in which I felt like an adopted member. My duties included informal conversation with the students, which took place throughout the day, as well as a scheduled, two-hour weekly conversation session (not required but in which most of the students participated most of the time). Further, my boss asked me to provide a monthly lecture on intercultural communication, which I was delighted to do and which was open to the entire university town campus (which includes two other graduate schools) and the general public. In addition, I edited scores of academic research papers from our department that were translated from Chinese into English. My purpose was to ensure that the papers read like they were written by native English speakers.

That year provided the opportunity to get to know dozens of students. I learned not only about their language and communication strengths and challenges, but also about their lives and concerns. And I learned that what my Chinese students in the US had shared with me about their educational experiences was certainly the norm. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the Chinese educational system and its effects on individuals and society. Yet, suffice it to say that I slowly began to see the many cultural differences between the U.S. and China – particularly the differences in educational approaches and specifically the approach to language learning and communication.

I was able to extend my one-year position while looking for a new opportunity, which came in September 2013. I was fortunate to land a position in the same university's business school teaching the required Business English course in the MBA program (into which I enfold intercultural communication topics and at least one class devoted to managing across cultures). Further, I provided an intercultural communication orientation lecture for the school's international students at the beginning of the fall term, along with some other duties supporting international students' needs, as well as being as being available to edit faculty research papers prior to submission to academic journals. At this writing, my duties have expanded to developing and leading a series of non-credit skills development seminars (e.g. priority setting and time management, presentation skills, basic skills for writing in English, etc.) and editing student-

reported stories translated from Chinese into English for the school's English language web pages, as well as other incidental editing requested by the dean's administrative support staff.

3.2. Teaching Many Levels of Meaning

The MBA program is open only to Chinese students because coursework is delivered in Mandarin. My course is delivered entirely in English, and to set the tone I begin each new class with a statement about my approach to the course, my teaching philosophy and so on. Speaking at a slower pace than I would with native speakers I deliver the following message, watching for signs of comprehension or lack thereof from the students, and stopping here and there to ask if there are any problems in understanding.

This course is called Business English. However, I don't think the title accurately describes what is going to happen here. I really think of the course as communication for a business setting taught in English for developing business leaders. Indeed, as students in the MBA program, you are here to develop as leaders of departments, divisions or companies. Some of you may end up starting your own company. In fact, any one of you may become a leader in today's expanding global society or even become a leader of this nation.

Language exists to help human beings communicate. Indeed, human beings have an innate need, a craving, to connect with each other, and language is one of the easier ways to do that. However, it is only one way to communicate. The other is nonverbal communication. Whether verbal or nonverbal, communication is about using symbols in the form of words or nonverbal signals to meet a need, and it is largely about making and sharing meaning. The challenge, however, is to understand that communication is a cultural exercise. What makes sense, the meaning of something in your native language and culture may be very different from that of a foreigner's language and culture. So, for this course, the first thing to understand is that we are here to *communicate* with each other, to understand meaning, and to improve language skill in the process.

I know that you have studied English for years. Yet, what I have learned from my Chinese students and friends is that few of you have had the chance to speak with a native English speaker, to speak naturally and about topics that particularly interest you. Although this is a required course, it still exists within the framework of your course of study in the MBA program, so I am going to take it that you are interested in the topics! And, you can count on me to deliver lessons that will keep you awake and participating!

But, here is what I really want you to understand. I am not interested in your speaking 'perfect English.' First of all, there is no such thing as perfection. In fact, if your English were perfect, then I wouldn't have a job! And, realistically, in the few weeks that we have together, you cannot expect to achieve mastery. But you can make great improvement if you take the work seriously. Further, I do not want to hear the following phrase EVER: "My English is so poor." I should apologize to you for not speaking Mandarin. But, the point is this: I cannot help you improve if you don't speak. What I want you to do is use the words you know to try to make the meaning that you have in mind. I will listen hard, and I expect all of you to listen hard so that we all help each other. I will listen for the meaning that I think you are trying to make, and then supply new vocabulary so that you can get as close as you can to the meaning of your ideas.

Here is the other thing that I need you to understand: Any time you engage in another person's language it is a cultural exercise. I am from the United States, a culture very different from yours. I can only teach you from my perspective as a Westerner, trying to be mindful of your culture. However, it is important that you understand that how a native speaker uses the language is informed by culture. So, what we are going to be engaging in here is an exploration of language use that is NOT about lists of vocabulary and grammar rules, but using the language naturally as expression of thoughts and ideas and opportunities to ask for and provide information. How we express ourselves in the West is probably different from how you do that in China. But it is essential that you understand this in order to really be able to communicate, to make and share meaning.

Finally, I want you to know that my teaching approach may be different from what you have experienced before. I view the classroom as a gathering of people who are here to learn and that we are a community of learners. I say 'we,' because the teacher is a learner, too. I learn from you, as well. Now, I am a bit older than you, have a lot of educational experience, professional experience, and life experience. So, I can help guide you. But I don't know everything, and I will never pretend when I don't know an answer to a question. Most likely I will say something like, 'Let's see what we can find out about this.' So, my role as a teacher is to serve largely as a facilitator and education agent, probing your mind and prodding you to think. In fact, you think you are here to learn English, but I see my job as helping you to learn to think better. And my pledge to you is that I will work hard to help you learn and grow, and I will never purposely embarrass you.

Since you are training as future business leaders, then my lessons and modes of evaluating your work will model the professional world. For example, most of you should be getting at least annual performance evaluations. If you have a good boss, then you should be getting feedback all along. If your company is productively engaging in employee evaluation, then the results of your performance review should not be a mystery. So, I will clearly outline assignments and expectations, using a rubric for evaluating your work, so that you will know your strong points and areas that need improvement. At the end of the course there will be no mystery about your grades. In short, I don't give you a grade; you earn it. Next, I review the syllabus and course calendar then invite questions. It never fails that someone asks right away about the final exam, to which I reply, "There isn't going to be a final exam. You will do a final presentation or project. But, the point is that you should be concerned about LEARNING and not about a test score! There will be no Gaokao here! This is a communication course. The proof of your skill development will be if you can communicate coherently in English."

If there is time, I invite the class to interview me. I like to share my background with them so that they know my lessons are backed up with real-world experience in a corporate environment, small business, government, and nonprofit (called non-government organizations outside the West); that I have functioned as an executive director, public relations director, writer/editor/publication manager, radio broadcaster, project manager, events planner and manager, fundraiser, consultant, trainer, facilitator for group problem solving, and public speaker; and that all of this took place before coming to university teaching where I have taught communication, public speaking, and composition (writing).

Given that my students are either full-time employees or have had work experience and are,

therefore, a bit older and more mature than the majority of graduate students in our school, they seem to appreciate this approach. We explore many levels of meaning in class, from vocabulary to reading comprehension to discussions of workplace challenges, problem-solving, and ethics.

One assignment I created on the topic of management that provides multiple levels of meaning is having the students identify a problem that came up at work, its impact, how it was solved, who was involved in the solution, and if they agreed with how it was solved. Then they either support why they agreed with the solution or if they did not, then how they would have done things differently. The students have greatly enjoyed this assignment, forming small groups to discuss their experience and the elements of the assignment. Then at least one person from each group shares a problem that the respective group deems most compelling to share with the entire class. The ensuing discourse is rich with opportunities to address meaning from the most basic to the higher level. Chances to help the students improve vocabulary – the meaning of new words and the concepts behind them – surface immediately. Questions about the meaning of certain business practices or procedures come up. Higher level meaning of good management and business ethics become part of discussion. And students learn the meaning of openly sharing what they know and making new connections for potential future business.

3.3. Writing

When I teach writing, whether in my own country or in China, I start out by talking about communication then segue into the following:

> Writing is a particular form of communication that is put on paper or entered in an electronic format for others to read at any given moment. Because the written word is usually read by an individual in solitude without the opportunity to ask the writer, "What do you mean by this?" it is essential that you write clearly, concisely and with the most appropriate and powerful words to get your meaning across. Good writing is always about the reader, not the writer! It doesn't matter how heartfelt your words are, if they do not make sense to the reader or convey a clear meaning, then you have wasted your time. Good writing starts with good thinking. And it proceeds with accurate descriptions. I don't remember who taught me this, but it has stuck with me for years. The job of the writer is to 'draw a picture with words.' Here is another way to think about good writing. It is like a road map. It needs to take the map reader to her destination as quickly and effectively as possible. No one wants a map that has been embellished by the maker with signs and symbols that clutter and that may have no significance for the general user of the map. The same goes for good writing.

In China, I supplement the above with the following:

> Anytime you engage in another person's language, you are performing an intercultural communication exercise. So, your challenge as a non-native speaker writing in English will have less to do with what you probably think is the most important issue, 'perfect grammar,' and more to do with understanding how the English language reader expects

> to see written communication. For example, in the U.S. our communication style is direct. We get to the point, meaning we are concise, and the current writing style for non-academic writing is conversational rather than formal. Further, you may discover that some of the words and phrases you have been taught are not used in 21st century U. S. English. And please understand that I am citing the U.S. because it is my culture. I cannot speak for what is taught in the U.K. But I can tell you that there are many differences between U.S. and U.K. English, and I will point these out throughout the course as examples come up.
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> Ultimately, I am more interested in helping you communicate your ideas or information, helping you to make sense, to get to the meaning you intend. I expect you to make grammatical mistakes. Believe me, plenty of native English speakers make plenty of writing mistakes! But what I really want to emphasize is good thinking before you start writing, knowing what you want to say and how you will organize it to make sense to the reader. We can clean up the grammar and other problems throughout the process.

Inevitably, some non-native English speakers will on occasion use words or expressions that are not common in the U.S. and may even be nonsensical, which leads to interesting discussions about meaning. Here is an amusing example. In an assignment during my first year as a language coach I asked students to write a brief account of one of the favorite places they had visited in China. One wrote about a province's beauty and good food where she enjoyed "ass meat." I laughed when I read it, and later asked the student if she meant "donkey." She did not know that word and looked it up on the translation application on her mobile phone. Sure enough, the translation was ass. We had a good laugh when I explained that although technically it was right, ass in my culture is most often used in the vernacular to mean a person's buttocks, and it also means a person who is difficult or unpleasant to deal with. If referring to the animal, we say donkey. I did admit that in the Bible ass is used instead of donkey, but that such usage is within the context of an ancient text. And, for the record, I told her, we do not eat donkey meat.

Although I have not encountered the following in students' written work, it comes up for discussion in my business communication course because the phrase is included in the textbook I use: "How do you do?" Every Chinese student I have met has been taught this greeting. (Although I don't recall any Chinese using this expression when introduced to me.) I explain that it originated in England and that in common daily communication, U.S. Americans don't use it. Those who came of age before World War II or maybe in the 1950s would be most likely to use the phrase, or perhaps dignitaries, such as the President of the United States and members of Congress. In response to an introduction, I tell the students, most people say, "I'm happy to meet you," or "Glad to meet you."

Recalling this line of discussion now, I wonder if today's U.S. youth would even know what "how do you do" means? I can just imagine a 12-year-old asking, "How do you do *what*?" This recalls to me early in my sojourn in China the bewildered looks from students when I greeted them with, "How are you doing?" They couldn't figure out what it was that they were doing that I was inquiring about. The meaning was lost.

That "How do you do?" appears in the British textbook I use for the course provides a

great opportunity to point out differences between U.S. and U.K. English. I point out that other differences between the two cultures' English can be seen in spelling and in terms for objects, events and ideas. For example, in the U.S. we often use a "z" (as in organization) whereas in the U.K, it will be an "s" (organisation). Terms for objects differ as well, such as "truck" in the U.S. and "lorry" in the U.K., and terms for certain events diverge, such as being "fired" from a job in my country, whereas in England one gets "sacked." We express certain ideas differently from, too, as evidenced in conveying fatigue "I'm tired" in the U.S., but in England "I'm knackered."

In addition to covering some basic business writing in my MBA course, I also provide feedback to students from across the campus who are preparing personal statements for applications to internships or doctoral programs overseas. Further, I regularly edit short feature stories about various business school events and activities that are posted on the school website. These are written by Chinese business school students in their language. Then a bi-lingual student translates the story into English. Time and again, I encounter a lot of effusive and "flowery" language.

One evening off campus when talking with a group of young Chinese professionals, I shared some experiences about student writing and wondered aloud why so many wrote effusively and without appropriate description and evidence. One of the participants immediately responded, "Well, this is what we were taught. Our teachers told us to use a lot of pretty words. Are you telling us this is wrong?" I had to deliver the bad news that if writing for informational purposes for an English speaking audience that this was, indeed, wrong.

4. Meaning in My Personal Domain

Sommer, Baumeister & Stillman (2012, pp. 3-4) look at the power of personal narrative as a way for people to understand meaning and state that individuals search for meaning in their daily lives in much the same way that they look for general meaning in life. Reviewing the four needs of meaning – purpose, values, efficacy, and self-worth – the authors go on to say that people need to seek "a way to make sense of events whose implications contradict their understanding of what makes life meaningful…Life stories communicate a wealth of information regarding the ways in which people counteract the loss of meaning". I can testify to the salience of their proposition that sharing a personal narrative helps the author negotiate meaning of events and/or life. This paper is proof. The act of preparing this auto-ethnography is a dual-purpose exercise. The overt purpose is to make a useful contribution to academia, but deep down it is helping me make sense of my life in China. Frankl (2002) posits that rather than focusing on a general meaning of life, one must discern what is meaningful in the here-and-now since our lives change. Given that change has been the constant in my life since even before arriving in China in June 2012, trying to discern what is meaningful in the present moment and mourning the loss of meaning from my former life has been a topic of reflection and source of stress.

4.1. My Personal Narrative

I lost my job in January 2009 due to the financial crisis in the U.S. Yet, I transformed the loss into a gain by going back to school that fall to earn a master's degree in communication studies

with a focus in intercultural communication by spring 2011. Indeed, I had returned to school with the idea of shaking up my life and finding a new career direction, although I wasn't sure at the time what it would be.

Initially, I took the opportunity to work in China to "learn and earn" for a year. I perceived the job offer, which had come a couple of months after networking at a major academic conference, as a once-in-a-lifetime chance. I could immerse myself in Chinese culture and focus on intercultural communication, hopefully learn some Mandarin, and observe my own adjustment process. When I returned to the U.S., I reasoned, I would have valuable experience that would be in demand given China's growing stature in the world of global commerce. I envisioned training corporate executives being assigned to posts in China to help prepare them for their sojourn.

I certainly accomplished the mission of shaking up my life, but the result has been very different from my original plan. Married for many years (no children), I had expected to return to the U.S. after that one year in China. However, once here and free from the stresses of a marriage that had been on a steady decline, I realized how deeply unhappy I really was, that I didn't want to return to the relationship and wanted to remain in China indefinitely. At this writing, nearly three years after leaving the U.S., the divorce is in process.

After the waning of the honeymoon phase of my sojourn, the initial "love affair" with the new culture in which everything is new and exciting, which lasted about a year, I struggled with feelings of depression. Yet, as an intercultural communication academic, of all people, I had expected more from myself, perhaps, than other expatriates might demand of themselves. After all, I was familiar with the literature on culture shock, intercultural adjustment and, etc., and therefore, I should have expected it and been able to deal with it. Yet, I did not fully appreciate the double-dose of loss that I had inflicted on myself: grieving the failed marriage and the loss of cultural reference points.

Culture shock was only part of my malaise. Meaning in life was unraveling as a result of my radical life changes and how they impacted the four basic needs for meaning. My purpose for being here had changed; a deep value – marriage commitment – had shifted into reverse; efficacy in that I was making a difference to students was the only strong sense of meaning that I was experiencing (but self-efficacy, important in intercultural adjustment, was barely existent, given the language barrier); and I fell into a vicious cycle of disavowing my self-worth for all the chaos I had brought down on myself and my husband. For a long time, I ruminated on the decline of my marriage, acknowledging that it was irretrievable and that I was right to leave it yet fantasizing that perhaps a miracle could happen, that maybe the relationship could be resurrected and redeemed. However, I would pull myself out of it, clearly seeing the folly of such ideas, then fall into victimizing myself with the cruel thought that my life was over; I would grow old and sick and no one would be there for me, I would never be loved again.

Growing weary of my self-torture month and after month, it dawned on me that one of the best ways to heal was to help others, and I recommitted to staying focused on doing all I could to help students. It didn't matter whether they were my students or not. In fact, students from across the university who were preparing personal statements for applications to internships or doctoral programs overseas began to seek me out, having heard from my former or current students that I would give feedback and suggest corrections to anyone needing help with English

writing and communication. Students also sought me out for advice on personal matters, as well. They needed an adult who would listen and provide honest responses without assuming an authoritarian attitude. Thus, with a deep sense of purpose, to make a positive contribution to young people who would be the future leaders of China and the world, I began to climb out of my depressed state.

So, as I have repurposed my life, my positive affect is on the rise. I have reconfirmed the value of love and that there are many kinds of meaningful love: the love for my students, new friends, my work, pursuit and sharing of knowledge, new adventures and discovery, and more. I feel the joy of efficacy as I see that I am bringing new information, ideas and ways of being in the world to students. And my self-worth is being restored because of these.

5. Discussion

Since threading immediate and intermediate levels of meaning (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002) throughout discussing my professional domain in the first part of this paper, I will focus discussion in this section on the higher level of meaning in my personal domain.

Living in China I have come to recognize the significance of belonging by the mere fact that I don't belong. In fact, I went through an intense period of wondering, "Where in this world *do* I belong?" This held particular irony for me. With an arts background, self-described free spirit, member of the US Baby Boom generation and iconoclast (aha, there is, indeed, membership!), someone who never liked being labeled or categorized, I could not appreciate belongingness until I moved here. I could accept or reject belonging with comfort in my own culture. Here I am the outsider whether I like it or not. Taking belonging to the next step is to connect it with identity. Since I have come to a more mature understanding of what it means to belong, now I proudly self-identify as a teacher. Such a role is esteemed in China, so identifying as a teacher has a big payoff in respect from others. This is not necessarily the case in the US, where a saying goes, "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach." Even more interesting to me is that I take care to point out that I teach in a university; I am not a teacher in a language school or kindergarten where just about anyone who can speak English can get a job. (So interesting to note the attitude about the identity, isn't it?) McCall and Simmons (1966, p. 288) posit that entwined with social roles is making connection between purpose, roles, values, and contribution through action to something greater than oneself, with purpose also speaking of the future, having goals and hope for achievement. Again, my role as teacher is directly connected to my sense of purpose, which is directly tied to my values for wanting to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of young Chinese. As for achievement, I tell my students that my greatest achievement will be the day they tell someone else how that teacher really made them *think*!

Earlier, I noted that as an intercultural communication academic, I should have known what to expect when sojourning in another culture. I knew that culture shock ensues as one deals with the stress of new and unfamiliar situations, particularly trying to form relationships (Chen & Starosta, 2005, p. 164),

> When many familiar cultural cues and patterns are severed, when living or working

> in an ambiguous environment for an extended period of time, when our values and beliefs are questioned in a new environment, and when we are continually expected to perform with appropriate skills and speed before we are able to understand clearly the rules of performance.

What I didn't take into account was how painful it would be to deal with personal and cultural loss simultaneously. So, it has been difficult for me to gauge my feelings of and causes for depression – how much of it would be a normal reaction to living in a completely different society and how much of it has been grieving the lost relationship which led to feeling weak, disoriented, directionless, and so on. However, as I was able to slowly battle my interior warfare and devote myself to a deeper meaning in life through my work, I began to feel better. Interestingly, meaning in life is a protective aspect in intercultural adjustment, according to Pan, Wong, Chan & Johnson (2008, p. 506, p. 512) who studied two groups of Chinese students, one in Hong Kong and the other in Australia, to successfully test hypotheses that meaning of life has a positive effect on the negative stresses of acculturation and mediates the interplay between such stress and the participants' positive affect. Their work cites research in resilience which generally describes that individuals with a sense of meaning in life experience a protective factor that supports "positive adaptation outcomes in diverse adverse situations". They also noted that culture-specific and universal aspects can be found in individuals' orientation to meaning of life. In short, the researchers stated, "When one is making satisfactory progress toward valued goals and feels that life is purposeful, positive affect will emerge as a sign".

It is also instructive here to note the meaningfulness of work, in general. Most people work to live; some of us live to work. Wrzesniewski (2003) speaks of three levels of meaning of work in the US. The first is Job, where work is the way to earn money for other meaningful activities. Next is Career, where the individual works toward advancement, associated with higher earnings and status. But it is with Calling that people find fulfillment within the work. This is the arena of working toward a greater good, making a difference. "Only for those with Callings is work a wholly enriching and meaningful activity," states Wrzesniewski (2003, p. 301). Being a loving, creative, and inspiring teacher who strives for excellence and with the conviction that I am making an important contribution to students' lives is what gives my life purpose and meaning. It is Calling. (Fortunately, the students validate my impact.) So, I have come to view my dedication and approach to teaching akin to servant leadership. As put forward by Greenleaf (1977), the servant leader is foremost called to serve. In their essay, "Modeling meaning in life: The teacher as servant leader," Herman & Marlowe (2005, p. 178), list servant leader attributes: "Servant leaders need skills in listening, empathy, healing, persuasion, awareness, foresight, conceptualization, commitment to the growth of people, stewardship, and building community". I believe that these are the attributes of a good teacher and they align with my teaching philosophy and practices.

6. Conclusion

Human beings make and find meaning on several levels, as we are intrinsically driven to do so in order to experience life satisfaction and sense of fulfillment. In this paper, I have shared

my experiences as a teacher of language, communication and intercultural communication that are based in helping students to understand meaning in these arenas. This basic level of working with meaning has led to higher levels of meaning in discussions inside and beyond the classroom with scores of students, positively affecting not only the students but also myself. Simultaneously, I have grappled with the deeper meaning of my life after making radical career, relationship and personal life changes and becoming a sojourner in another culture. Principles derived from what I have lived I incorporate into my teaching, and what I experience as a teacher folds back into my personal life creating a new sense of wholeness for me. At the beginning of this paper I put forward that meaning is everything. At the completion of this work, it is clear that such a statement is not a mere cliché. To paraphrase Frankl (1984): Meaning is what makes life worth living.

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Author Note

Priscilla Lynne Young is senior lecturer at the Peking University HSBC Business School in Shenzhen, China where she teaches business communication in the MBA program and "Writing in English" open to all business school students. Additionally, Priscilla offers professional development training for the administrative staff and skills development seminars open to any student. After decades as a business professional, she earned her master's degree in communication studies with a focus in intercultural communication at the University of Rhode Island, USA. Priscilla is newsletter editor for the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies and is former secretary/treasurer for the organization.