

(Translation only for reference. Please refer to the original Chinese text.)

Interview: My 35 years at the Embassy of Switzerland in China

On the afternoon of the last working day of May 2020, Chinese partners including leaders of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diplomatic Service Bureaus came to attend the retirement farewell party for a veteran employee organized by the Swiss Embassy in China.



Swiss Ambassador Bernardino Regazzoni and his wife held a farewell lunch for Ms. Zhou Jingren at Ambassador's Residence, 28th May 2020.

Ms. Zhou Jingren, Senior Consular Officer and Translator of the Swiss Embassy, joined the Embassy in February 1985 and retired in May 2020. She has been working here for 35 years and 3 months and she is the one who served the longest among Chinese staff for the embassy. As the witness of embassy changes as well as the development of Sino-Swiss relations over the past 35 years, Ms. Zhou has been working in various fields of the embassy, such as politics, economy, culture, education, visa, etc.

In January 1950, Switzerland became one of the first Western countries recognizing the new China, and then rented a courtyard house in Beijing Nanheyuan as the representation office. 24 years later, the new embassy compound was built in Sanlitun embassy area in 1974. Another ten years after that, Ms. Zhou joined the embassy as French translator. At that time, there were only 19 staffs and today the Beijing embassy has become one of Switzerland's largest diplomatic institutions overseas with nearly 100 staffs.



New Swiss embassy compound in Sanlitun, 1975.

“Ms. Zhou acquired and developed a fortune of knowledge, experiences and network that the Embassy has been able to benefit from to this day”, said Mr. Christian Gobet, Head of

Operations, Counsellor of the embassy at the farewell party. In the eyes of her colleagues, Ms. Zhou is very low-key and dedicated to her work. She has no interest in fame or wealth and is grateful as if it backs to the very beginning when she joined the embassy. She often says, "I think I am really a lucky person."

On the occasion of her retirement, the Embassy interviewed Ms. Zhou who shared her 35-year experience at the embassy.



Ms. Zhou at work

1. What did you do before joining the Swiss embassy?

I studied French at university and have been working as a French language teacher for several years after graduation. At the beginning of 1985, due to personal reasons my university classmate who worked at the Swiss embassy resigned. He recommended his position to me. Later I replaced him. The new embassy building was completed in 1975. When I came, it was just ten years new. There were only 19 staffs and two sections in the office building: General Office and Commercial Section. Together with another two colleagues, I was responsible for translations of all different fields for the embassy.



Ms. Zhou worked in the Swiss embassy in 1988.

2. What challenges did you have when first joined the embassy?

In the 1980s, foreign diplomats seldom speak Chinese. They need translation service for 'each every step' and we were definitely like their 'walking sticks'. At that time all diplomatic notes and notices received from Chinese partners were only in Chinese, thus the translation work was rather heavy. The three of us worked in shifts and practiced ourselves into all-around translators. To tell the truth, I was not very uncomfortable and almost collapsed in the first three months after joining the embassy; however it was particularly these experiences which allowed me to grow rapidly. In my spare time later, I

independently translated many French articles into Chinese and published in academic journals.



Articles translate by Ms. Zhou on the magazine of *World Art* in 2014

Misunderstandings caused by cultural differences with my Swiss colleagues also brought me some troubles. For example, if Chinese people didn't do a good job on something, they sometimes made apologetic smiles; but Swiss people would understand it as an intentional mocking. The huge difference between Chinese and western thinking indeed gave me a tough lesson. Fortunately, Swiss people are generally very sincere and simple; after we explained to each other, and they know that I did not have any bad intentions, they were enthusiastic to introduce me more of their culture and help me to better understand. My colleagues were really helpful to me.

3. What is your greatest gain over so many years at the embassy?

My greatest gain is that I am so fortunate to having been worked with ten Swiss ambassadors. They have different personalities and ways of doing things. I have personally witnessed these ambassadors working hard for the development of Sino-Swiss relations and learned from them what is called being enterprising and dedicated. I have also met hundreds of Chinese and Swiss colleagues, especially Swiss colleagues who are from different language areas (Switzerland has four official languages) thus have completely different customs and habits. I have learned from them the uniqueness of Swiss diversity.

In addition, the nature of working at the embassy determines that one has the opportunity to meet officials and celebrities in different fields. For example, when I worked for the cultural section, I used to help invite Chinese celebrities like Bingxin, Wang Shuo, Wang Meng, Wu Zuguang to embassy activities. These work have brought me unique and valuable experiences.



The wall in the corridor of embassy building showing all Swiss ambassadors who have worked in China.

4. What/who is the most unforgettable thing/person to you during the 35 years?

The most unforgettable are different ambassadors who have really different personalities. When I first came, the then ambassador Hansjakob Müller is very humorous and kind. He likes to sit on my table, chats with me while putting his feet on the trash can.

Ambassador Erwin Schurtenberger looks serious but is actually very humorous. He often has some unexpected jokes for us and then hides aside, secretly laughing like a child.

'China expert' Uli Sigg has world's Top One collection in the field of contemporary Chinese art. When I visited Switzerland in 2000, he invited me to his house. When entered one of the rooms, I was totally shocked seeing dozens of statues, all of which are the same smiley face of Chinese painter Fang Lijun; in another room, I saw sculptures of Chinese cabbage all over the floor.

Sinologist Dominique Dreyer likes to raise peacocks and has raised six or seven at most. Peacocks often walk in the garden, 'attacking' guests from time to time; but strangely that they never attack the Ambassador. One day Ambassador said with smiles that in his pocket there are always peacocks' favorite peanuts.

Ambassador Dante Martinelli is very kindly. During his term, the embassy recruited an interpreter particularly for Ambassador, therefore I can slowly transfer and concentrate on consular and other work.



[Ms. Zhou and Ambassador Dominique Dreyer in front of office building, 2002](#)

5. It is said that the Chinese names of many ambassadors/diplomats were given by you?

I don't know why it became a tradition of this embassy, that newly arrived diplomats would come asking me to think up a Chinese name for them. Later, they would especially come back thanking me because when they had meetings outside with Chinese counterparts, they all praised for those Chinese names. Maybe I know better the language and culture of Switzerland and China after being translator for years, and sometimes you do need inspirations for something.

6. What do you think are the biggest changes over the past 35 years? And what remains the same?

The biggest change is the increasing number of embassy staffs, as well as the improving work environment. The embassy has undergone three major renovation and expansion projects. In 2000, we added a layer to the two-story building. In 2005, the visa office was

built. In 2009, the visa office and business hub office were expanded. Another change is that since Ambassador Erwin Schurtenberger (in the 1990s), mutual visits between the two countries have increased significantly: in 1996, Swiss President Jean-Pascal Delamuraz visited China as the head of state for the first time; President Jiang Zemin visited Switzerland in 1998; in 2000, President Adolf Ogi visited China again. Also, before 2000, there were very few embassy activities with more than 100 guests. In recent years, with the development of Sino-Swiss relations, the embassy has held large-scale themed activities for 1-2 thousand guests every year, which was very creative each time and received rather positive feedback.

Things remains the same is the quiet, pragmatic, traditional and inclusive Swiss working style, which never changes for so many years. Swiss innovation is also worth mentioning. Swiss politicians, especially entrepreneurs, are full of pioneering spirit in their relations with China, and Switzerland-China relations in the field of innovative cooperation has become a model for the world.



[Ms. Zhou interacts with a Swiss band in the House of Switzerland at 798, Beijing, August 2008](#)

7. Have you ever thought of leaving the embassy?

I never took the initiative to think about leaving, but the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs did offer me some opportunities to work abroad. For personal reasons, I finally gave up. That's destiny. In 2012 and 2013, the MFA suggested me twice to go to Geneva, but I felt that I was already too old to live abroad alone. But I don't regret it at all. I still think I am a very lucky person. Some former Swiss colleagues travelled back to Beijing to see me. They said, "you are still here!" and I said jokingly, "this is not my fault!"

8. What is the most impressive moment for you during the 35 years?

I still remember the first moment when I saw Ambassador Müller in 1985. To my knowledge, an ambassador should be admirable and so high up there from me that I can never reach. Ambassador Müller shook my hand and said kindly: "Our embassy has such a young girl now". I was 28 years old that year.

The most memorable moment for me was the completion ceremony of the embassy's third floor construction in 2000, which coincided with the visit of the Swiss President Adolf Ogi to Beijing. At that time, Ambassador Dominique Dreyer invited me and another Swiss colleague to participate in the ribbon-cutting ceremony, and said, "You are the only qualified staff to represent Chinese employees of this embassy in the ribbon-cutting." His words meant a lot to me and I was deeply moved. In the summer of 2014, the embassy

also held an honorary commendation meeting for me and Chef Wang of the Residence, and awarded us honorary certificates.



The embassy held an honorary commendation meeting for senior staff like Ms. Zhou, summer 2014.

9. There are more and more younger colleagues at the embassy. Is there any advice for them?

Young people are active and innovative, but may frequent change jobs. I think the first important thing is to do the existing work well, being humble and dedicated, down-to-earth and hard working. The overall national character of Swiss people is being modest and low-key, and they value these qualities very much.



Group picture of Ms. Zhou, Ambassador and other colleagues during the Swiss embassy autumn outing in 2019

10. Have you been to Switzerland? What are your plans after retirement?

I have been to Switzerland twice: in 2000 I went there for travel and in 2007 I attended the head quarter's training. Both left good memories to me. After retiring, I would like to participate the table tennis club for senior people. I want to study the history of Han dynasty in senior college. I like to travel and I want to go to more places within my ability. I started travelling around the country since early 1980s and have traveled to all provinces in China. I believe when people are young it is good to go to hard places. I went these places such as Tibet, Xinjiang and Mohe when I was young. Now I especially like mountains. I can find inner peace immediately when I step into the mountains.



Ms. Zhou and her daughter in Lucerne, Switzerland, 2000.



Ms. Zhou participated the head quarter's training in Bern, 2007

11. What else do you want to say to your colleagues?

Relatively speaking, Switzerland is more democratic; because of institutional, traditional and educational reasons, it is easier to communicate with Swiss people. The working atmosphere of the Swiss embassy is also very harmonious. I sincerely wish all my colleagues work hard and lots of health and happiness.



This interview is dedicated to Ms. Zhou Jingren. We wish her good health and happy retirement!