*This transcript covers the main points in this episode of Helsinki China Podcast.*

Today, it's my pleasure to have Mr. Mikko Puustinen here with us. Perhaps, some of you have seen him on TV here, he's an advisor for ministry of economic affairs and employment. What is even more interesting is, in fact, that he's an expert on China and he's a fluent Chinese speaker. He obtained his education in East Asian studies and political sciences at the University Helsinki. And I think he has been very active in the Finnish society in promoting the importance of learning about China. Besides his advisory role for the Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, he's also the chairman of Finland-China Society.

Thank you Julie for the kind invitation and it's my pleasure to be invited by the University of Helsinki and my alma mater, I graduated from there actually in 2000, so it's you know over 20 years from that point of time, but yes maybe shortly about the innovative journey. Actually it started from the University of Helsinki in 1993. There with East Asian studies as my major, as mentioned. So, actually before that, I didn't have any special relationship with China or even Asia. Maybe I had read you know a few more books or something than the average Finn, but other than that, I was basically starting from scratch you know including the language.

And to be honest, at that moment I wasn't so sure where this journey would take me, but

maybe there in the background, they were  still, you know in general level my biggest interest was in you know for  foreign languages in you know foreign societies, humanities, social sciences, and you know  politics, international politics especially.

So yeah, from that point of view I was very happy to be you know to get that opportunity to study at the University of Helsinki East Asian studies and at that time, by the way, on top of the main sort of the main language, which for me was Chinese, so the students had to choose another second language, East Asian language, which  practically meant for me either Korean or Japanese and I picked up Korean. I thought it was easier, we had to study two years for that and as also they did that and as mentioned  so regarding my other interests also  politics, international politics, was  something that I was very interested in so during my studies from you know 1993 to 2000  so also I took the political sciences,

especially international politics as my minor  and I did an extensive you know amount of courses on that one. So, that's basically you know that's my academic you know where the first education, on one hand on China studies, language,  culture, the society, and then, on the other hand the political sciences. So that was sort of my method or how I look at China.

During my studies we basically haveyou know we studied there for you know

three years and that three years our teacher Wang laoshi, so she says

you have been good students, but to be honest, if  you really want to learn this language, you have to go to China. So after three years of studies in the university, so me, and also there was a bunch of other students we went to Beijing for  Beijing Language and Culture University or Beiyu to for one year of studies. Actually, we took the same flight with our teacher, who was just returning to China. She was just ended her you know assignment in the university, so we took the same Finnair flight to  Beijing with her, which was I think was sort of an interesting thing and but there during that one year so certainly I was able to

get my Chinese skills on a higher level and after I came back I continued my studies in the university and then actually that in 1998  around that time, the University of Helsinki, they opened up the exchange exchanges with the Fudan University in  Shanghai, so, me and Raisa Asikainen, we were the first  students from the University Helsinki to take  on that exchange to go for Fudan for one year and that was in the end of my  studies and after when I came back.

So basically, I finished some of the last courses and wrote my thesis for

that so I graduated in 2000. And firstly I went just you know there was a fair amount

of let's say there have been expenses during  those years and didn't have any actually

scholarship for the Beijing you know a year. So, I just ended up going to work, which wasn't related directly related to China issues. For one year actually something you know Nokia related work here, but then I have to say this is one  thing of course there are things that you can plan and then you then you might get lucky, also. So in the end of 2000, I saw this ad on Helsingin Sanomat newspaper and the Embassy of Finland in  Beijing or the Foreign Ministry was looking for a in a way sinologist to the Embassy of Finland in Beijing. Annikki Arponen, who was, who had been there for a long time, a very experienced diplomat, also you know China expert. So she returned to Helsinki and I applied for that position  and luckily I was chosen for that one in 2001. And, then that was maybe a two-year contract you know that position hasn't been it's sort of like you know fixed-term thing, but actually, that trip took seven years so I went there for firstly for two but then  it was extended to all the way 2008. And so seven years there as a diplomat and

responsible for reporting about the Chinese  you know the politics, economics, the society.

Finland had and still has a  judicial cooperation with China.

I was responsible for giving support for that cooperation. Also, I had you know press

and culture office, and also every now and then I had to also act as an interpreter for some of the high-level visitors not too often which is  really difficult when you are doing 99% something else and then you are thrown into a situation, where you should be you know doing interpretation and didn't have any special you know education  for that so, but really interesting and then actually, there was you know different  choices you know I could have been taking a step to go to the private sector, there was  something some interest from some businesses, also considerations about Foreign Ministry, but  then I actually sort of like chose something in between that. And that was the Shanghai World Expo project you know there's these World Expos held there, you know is it the big ones I guess every five years. So, Shanghai was about to host one in 2010 and Finland actually Theme  Pro or the predecessor for Business Finland, which is helping Finnish companies to become  international, so they tried to find people for this project for Finland for the Shanghai  World Expo. So, in 2008 I jumped on that train, which was interesting, because you know  we had like during six months for example, during the Expo, we had like more  people visiting our pavilion in Shanghai  that there are the whole population of Finland, so there was like some 5.7 million people.

After that a short time as you know private entrepreneur as a consultant but quite shortly there was you know another new position opened at the Embassy of Finland in

Beijing for a person just specializing in communications and culture. And I was in

a way asked if I would be interested among others. And then I said, well why not, I had been pushing myself for that direction that Finland should have a person

to do more for communications and culture. Build the image of Finland there in China and

that you know and that took  for another five years in the embassy.

So, firstly seven years there, then I was like, let me see, eight, three years away,

and I came back in another five years at  the embassy in Beijing. A little

bit part of the same perspective than during the  first time, but then going more deeply into the communications you know the whole, actually, during those years, the Chinese social media was in a way you know created or started. Because I went there in 2011,

so things like WeChat and Weibo were  just starting off, so, actually we did you know

firstly, for example, you know build the Weibo, you know platform for the embassy, and later on quite soon the WeChat and others. So, that was interesting too.

Then 2016 back to Helsinki Finland with my family and three years from 2016 to 19 as once again as a private consultant in a private entrepreneur offering services for businesses and  other organizations. Then two years ago the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the  Employment established this China position  in the unit for EU and international affairs. So, on top of the Foreign Ministry China-related affairs are expanding to more and more also to the field of other ministries in Finland. So it's not just not about the general diplomatic affairs or you know the foreign policy and so forth more and more about the economy in a deeper and wider sense Chinese investments to Finland and so on so forth. Also, other you know relating to other ministries like the Ministry of Transport and Communication, so, as a part of that the Ministry of Economic  Affairs and Employment they established  this China-specific position and I applied for that and found it still had sort of like this interest in the government affairs and the you know state-to-state relations

and that's how the  last two years have been going on for me.

If I by starting on 1993, have been able to find something let's say meaningful from the professional point of view in China related affairs that's almost 30 years ago

so I'm pretty sure that you or  anybody else in Finland, who is interested in trying to sort of like  build up a career around China in some ways I think it makes even  much more sense now than in 1993. So, that's my first point to the you know the audience and to students who you know has started. But then the other point is that you know you can't just rely on or build your competencies and skills just you know around, for example, the language,

or even you know purely on China as such. You need to have also other competencies in most of the cases, of course, if you are you know, if you want to be a sort of like you know interpreter, translator or that type of thing, then, of  course, you have to dive really deep into the language and so forth. But in most of the cases and, if you want to have more sort of wide scope of opportunities in front of you then you have to consider, well firstly, when you during your studies, what other subjects you choose as minor studies.

They have to somehow, there has to be an idea I would say, but where does this you know China studies or Asian studies as a major and then, on the other hand, something else is leading you, you know, how can you use that professionally. So, that's I think it's in a way  important, and you know I don't know, if I was so smart about it 30 years ago, but in a way, it's quite understandable. So, let's go back to 2000, when I was applying for the assignment in the Embassy of Finland, so what they saw from my CV, even though I didn't  have too much of working experience, they could see that I was not just able to speak Chinese and know  about China as such, I had also understanding about

some understanding about international  relations in general and politics, which

is, of course, very important, if you are you know  the Foreign Ministry and so on and so forth that's one thing you know that in  a way the CV and the contents of it can't be

too you know too narrow. There has to be there, and of course, what are those minor subjects what are the other competencies around that China thing you have there in the core.

That's you know, it depends on what you want to do with your life or where, what kind of career, or what  kind of work do you want to do. Also, I think what is important already during the studies is starting to gather information and building networks that are consistent with the end  that you have that I talked about professionally.

So, don't think that the different organizations, whether they're government or business or other, they are looking come to look for you, you know, you have to approach them somehow. Okay, there are some now maybe I think in the government and we

in a different ministry, there is an  understanding and that we have these

talents in you know coming up in the university, but since there are not so many China specific tasks or positions in the government. It's not too many, it's like you know

with one hand I can basically you know name them. So, then it's you know important that you know try to gather that information about different you know organizations  that are China-related that you are interested in.

And also even try to approach them somehow. Build in a way the network here in Finland,

and, by the way, I'm saying this also because I didn't do these things too well myself,

maybe I got lucky and so forth but you know just relying on luck maybe it's not the best way so you know being there done that so also in the mistakes so I try to be helpful here. One positive thing is, I think is that, there seems to be and maybe more need for China professional on a wider scan in Finland than before. I think there is this you know the feeling in different once awhile I talk about organizations but it's like you know whether it's governmental organizations, businesses, academic organizations.

We have just talked about this these days, you know also Julie and others about the China know-how in Finland. So, there's that the feeling in different entities that we need to have more people who know about China from different angles in different professions in

different fields. So, I think that's you  know, while actually, in China, the need for Finns or people based in Finland is maybe getting less, to be honest. So let me take the, well,

Finnish businesses or companies as an example that are the biggest employer of Finns in China or people based in Finland and China. They are less and less run by Finns or people from Finland. They are less run you know the operations are run by local people

by Chinese people. The amount of Finns in China is getting less and less, to be honest of course, this is this has been a long way, it's just all just partly because

the businesses have been you know there is a greater amount of talents in China

and they know the language, they know the culture, they know everything, they're much better than the Finns, who go there and so there is less need for you know expatriates, people sent from abroad to China. So, I don't mean that there aren't any, but that's the trend  so, in a way less need for you maybe to be sent there, but then there might be a need more need here, actually, in Finland than before. Regardless, my suggestion is that  still, you should go to China as soon as possible you know yourselves. And I encourage you to do so already during the start of your study, if it's just possible. Well  now we have this covid 19 here, but  especially if you are in the beginning of your studies and so anyway, if there is no this  we can work this out. Maybe next year is even much better, so I would suggest, even though this might not be that easy, in some ways  some people might have the feeling that you know there are so many problems, there's  pollution whatever, but I would say it really makes a difference. It's the cliche, of course, but it really makes a difference to study China in China than just here so. Of course, point of view of learning the language you know so many more opportunities there to do, but also to see at least on some level, if you are there in a university, you just see a little piece of how things

work in China, but you at least get some sense of how you know things move around there.

And, of course, once again build networks there so, if you are there I'm sure that for example, you would  be a student in Beijing or in Shanghai  you would be invited probably by the  embassy or the consulate general of Finland  to some event. You would meet you know people from Finnish organizations, from Finnish businesses different types.