

Applied linguistics in China

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Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is a country in which 56 ethnic groups (or nationalities) are officially recognized. The majority ethnic group, the Han Chinese, accounts for 91.6% of the total population, which is estimated to be approximately 1.27 billion on the China mainland alone and 1.3 billion for the 'Greater China' region, which includes the populations of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2001). On the China mainland, around 8% of the population are members of 55 minority groups, many of which have retained their own languages. The Han Chinese people speak two main groups of dialects: the northern dialects and the southern dialects. The northern dialects can be subdivided into seven subgroups, and the southern dialects into six subgroups (Huang, 1987: 33–45). Among the 55 minorities, it has been reported that as many as 80–120 languages are spoken (of which 60 are officially recognized) (Zhou, 2003: 23), and that these minority languages also show a significant amount of dialectal variation.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, it took a few years for an official language policy to be formulated, but since 1956, the government language policy has been the 'unification of the Chinese language' and the promotion of Putonghua, the 'common language' based on the northern dialect and the Peking pronunciation. Other language-planning aims have included the removal of illiteracy, the propagation of simplified characters, and the promotion of the official Romanization system of pinyin. Following the establishment of the republic, ethnic minorities were initially allowed to use and develop their languages, but their languages were suppressed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976); afterward, they were encouraged to become bilingual in their own languages and Chinese. Since 1949, various foreign languages have been taught in China at different times, and the learning of Russian has been considered to be of prime importance. Since the late 1950s, however, with the exception of during the Cultural Revolution, English has been regarded as the most important foreign language to learn. Other foreign languages of secondary importance include Japanese, German, French, and other languages for diplomatic purposes. At Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU), for example, over 30 foreign languages are currently taught.

Although applied linguistics can be dated back to the 1940s in the United States (Kaplan, 2002: vii), applied linguistics as a recognized discipline did not begin to establish itself in China till the late 1970s, at the end of the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, it can be claimed that applied linguistic issues and practices were part of the Chinese experience long before the term *yingyong yuyanxue* ('applied linguistics') came into use. This article begins with a brief review of the recent history of China and a summary of the development of linguistics in China. It then proceeds to a discussion of applied linguistics, with reference to the study of three types of language issues in China, concerning the Chinese language, minority languages, and foreign languages.

Historical Background

It is generally accepted that the Chinese have one of the oldest language traditions in the world, with a number of written texts dating back some 3000 years. Issues related to language have been at the heart of many of the key philosophical debates in Chinese intellectual history (Hansen, 1983). In addition, China has had a long history of classical lexicography dating from the work of Hsu Shen in the 1st century A.D. to the present (Wang and Asher, 1994). When the first Catholic missionaries under Matteo Ricci began to

visit China from the late 16th century on, they were immediately impressed by the intellectual culture they encountered. The first pioneers of modern dialectology were arguably the Protestant missionaries who arrived from the early 19th century on. They were fired by the desire to map the dialects of China in the service of their churches and were keenly concerned with learning and codifying the vernacular languages of their constituencies, including the Canton dialect, Hokkien, and the Amoy (Xiamen) dialect (Bolton and Luke, 2005). A number of the Protestant missionaries were also convinced of the need for language reform, and their proposals included the vernacularization of the Chinese writing system, and the use of various romanized writing systems alongside or instead of Chinese characters.

Such early dialectological work was accompanied by the incursion of Western traders, diplomats, and missionaries into China. After the First Anglo-Chinese War (1839–1842) and the Second Anglo-Chinese War (1856–1862), a number of ‘treaty ports’ were established at such locations as Canton (Guangzhou), Amoy (Xiamen), Foochow (Fuzhou), Ningpo (Ningbo), and Shanghai. A system of missionary schools was established in these and other locations, in which pupils were often taught English, which fast gained popularity as a language of commercial value. The Chinese authorities also began teaching English themselves and founded an interpreters’ college, the Tongwen Guan, in Peking in 1862, followed by other foreign language schools elsewhere. Somewhat later, by the beginning of the 20th century, a system of English-medium colleges and universities had been established across China (Bolton, 2003).

Late-19th-century China was a time and place of rapid social and political change, as the country attempted to come to terms with social disturbances, the pressures of modernization, and contact with the West. In 1911, the last emperor of China was deposed, and a republic was declared the following year. The decades that followed were politically chaotic, with various nationalist (Guomindang) and communist factions competing for power. In 1931, Japanese forces occupied Manchuria, and throughout the 1930s they fought against both the communists and nationalists for control of the country. After the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, the communists gained control, and the PRC was established on October 1, 1949.

The new government faced immense problems in rebuilding the economy and infrastructure of the country and in formulating its foreign policy. Initially, China’s leaders aligned themselves with the Soviet Union, but from the late 1950s and early 1960s on, they began to move away from this stance. Following this distancing, there was renewed interest in English, but this was cut short by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). During this period, education was made subservient to politics at a time when economic and political turmoil resulted in a tremendous loss of lives. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, however, a number of important policy changes took place, including the resumption of university education and the launching of Deng Xiaoping’s policy of ‘Four Modernizations,’ which soon evolved into a ‘reform and opening policy’ (Dillon, 1998: 109). In the 1980s and 1990s, China industrialized rapidly and economic growth has now created substantial pockets of new wealth (at least for certain sectors of the population) and has assisted in the formation of a new middle class. On the international front, China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 2001 and will host the Olympics in 2008.

Modern Linguistics in China

According to Branner (1997: 244), before the late 19th century, the Chinese linguistic tradition was ‘‘almost entirely philological’’ in the sense that ‘‘it was concerned with how to read received classical texts (especially rhyming texts), how to read rare characters, how to manage the great wealth of canonical alternate readings for individual characters, and how to explain the graphic structures of characters.’’ By the early 20th century, however, comparative linguistics in China had been advanced by the work of British scholars such as the missionary Joseph Edkins (1823–1905) and the consular official Edward Harper Parker (1849–1926), who was a pioneer in the collection of dialectological data (Branner, 1999). Such Western linguists contributed to the debates that took place on modernizing and reforming the Chinese language in the late nineteenth and early 20th century. After the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1912, various groups of Chinese scholars pressed for the reform of the written language,

which eventually resulted in the baihua movement of the 1920s and 1930s and in the emergence of modern standard Chinese (De Francis, 1950).

By the 1930s, a domestic tradition in linguistics and dialectology began to be established, associated with such scholars as Yuen Ren Chao (1892–1982), Fang Kuei Li (1902–1987), and Wang Li (1900–1986). By this time, linguists also began to classify Chinese dialects according to seven or eight major groups. Varieties such as the ‘Shanghai dialect,’ ‘Amoy vernacular,’ and ‘Canton dialect’ now came to be referred to as the Wu, Min, and Yue, a system of classification credited to Fang Kuei Li (Chan and Tai, 1989). All three scholars studied at Western universities: Chao took a Ph.D. in philosophy at Harvard (but also had extensive contacts with Edward Sapir, as well as Leonard Bloomfield and Roman Jakobson), Fang Keui Li studied linguistics in Chicago with Edward Sapir, and Wang Li read general linguistics and phonetics in Paris (Chan and Tai, 1989; Shen, 1994). In the 1920s and 1930s, many Chinese linguists, including Chao, became keenly involved in discussions on language reform and on such issues as a national phonetic alphabet, simplifying characters, and promoting literacy. Among nationalist politicians in the 1930s, however, the issue was how to ‘unify’ the language and the need for “one state, one people, one language” (De Francis, 1950: 84). After the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, such goals resurfaced in various language planning initiatives, as discussed in the next section.

Linguistics Applied and Applied Linguistics in Contemporary China

In contemporary China, applied linguistics is broadly associated with three types of linguistic activities: Chinese language education, developing minority languages, and the teaching of foreign languages, including English.

Applied Linguistics and the Chinese Language

In the post-1949 period, as noted above, a central tenet of official language policy has been the promotion of the spoken standard, Putonghua, and the codification and teaching of a standardized Chinese script. In 1954, the government initiated discussions on the simplification of Chinese characters, and in 1956, the First Character Simplification Scheme was implemented. After the Cultural Revolution, some attempt was made to increase the number of simplified characters, but it was not well received. In 1986, the 1964 list with 2235 simplified characters and 14 radicals (or parts of a character) was reaffirmed for general use. In tandem with the teaching of simplified characters, Putonghua has also been promoted as the standard spoken dialect in all official domains. In February 1956, the State Council issued a directive requiring all primary schools and secondary schools, except those in ethnic minority regions, to include the teaching of Putonghua in Chinese lessons from the autumn of 1956. If Chinese was taught in minority schools, then Putonghua should be used as a standard. To facilitate the learning of Putonghua, a Romanized script, Hanyu Pinyin, was finalized in 1958. Training workshops were organized for teachers, but this initiative was interrupted by political events and the Cultural Revolution. From the mid-1980s, much effort was spent in developing assessment instruments, culminating in the Putonghua Shuiping Ceshi (PSC or Putonghua Proficiency Test) for native speakers of Chinese, which was implemented widely from 1994 and formally endorsed again in 1997 by the State Language Commission. Another test designed for nonnative speakers of Chinese, the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK or Chinese Proficiency Test of China) was also established by 1988. The Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi is now internationally accepted as the standard test for Chinese as a Foreign Language (Gu, 1997; Lam, 2005).

Another notable area of applied Chinese linguistics has been that of machine translation. As early as 1956, a machine translation project team was established at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The initial work involved translation between Chinese and Russian. The focus was later changed to multilingual systems based mainly on translation protocols between Chinese and English. This machine translation research group later evolved into the Applied Linguistics Research Laboratory: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2002.

Although the effect of linguistics on language planning and Chinese studies can be traced back to the late 19th century, as mentioned earlier, it was not until 1980 that the Zhongguo Yuyan Xuehui (Society of Chinese Linguistics) held its inaugural meeting. In January 1984, the Yuyan Wenzhi Yingyong Yanjiusuo (Applied Linguistics Research Institute) was established under the auspices of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the *Zhongguo Wenzhi Gaige Weiyuanhui* (Commission on Language Planning of China), and in September of the same year, the institute held its inaugural conference. In 1985, at the first international conference on the ‘Teaching of Chinese,’ held in Beijing, it was proposed that an association for the teaching of Chinese should be established worldwide. In 1990, a symposium was held jointly by the Applied Linguistics Research Institute and Suzhou University to explore issues such as the scope of applied linguistics and its relevance for language teaching and language standardization. Two leading journals in applied Chinese linguistics are *Yuyan Wenzhi Yingyong* (Applied Linguistics), which was first published in 1992, and *Zhongwen Xinxu* (Chinese Information Processing), which appeared in 1984 (Fei, 1997).

Applied Linguistics and Minority Languages

The 55 minority ethnic groups occupy a sensitive position within China’s officially multicultural state, as their speakers represent some 8% of the population but are located in approximately 64% of the total land area (Dai, Teng, Guan and Dong, 1997: 10). The ten largest minority groups in China are the Zhuangs (16.2 million speakers), the Mans (10.7 million), the Huis (9.8 million), the Miaos (8.9 million), the Uygurs (8.4 million), the Tujias (8.0 million), the Yis (7.8 million), the Mongols (5.8 million), the Zangs or Tibetans (5.4 million), and the Buyeis (3.0 million) (Population Census Office, 2002).

The official language policy toward minorities is inscribed in the section of the Chinese constitution that states that “every ethnic minority is to use and develop their language” (Zhou, 1992: 37). The official educational directive on this issue further states that:

In schools where the majority of students belong to an ethnic minority, the language of textbooks and instruction should be in the language of that minority, if conditions permit. The Chinese language . . . should be taught in the last two years of primary school and in middle school to promote the national language. (Article 37 of the Program for the Implementation of Regional Autonomy for Ethnic Minorities, cited and translated in Zhou, 1992: 37.)

In the post-1949 drive to eliminate illiteracy, a number of literacy programs for the minorities have been organized. Before 1949, excluding the Huis and the Mans who use Chinese, 20 of the 55 minorities already had a written form for their languages; from the 1950s to the 1980s, orthographies were developed for nine other minority groups (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 1992; Ministry of Education, People’s Republic of China, n.d.). In some regions, the government and schools are now adopting a bilingual language policy aimed at preserving minority languages, yet simultaneously promoting Chinese, although the balance between languages varies greatly from region to region (Zhou, 1992: 38–40).

At present, a particular concern for both Chinese linguists and international concern groups is the plight of a number of endangered languages. Huang (2003) notes that 22 languages in China currently have fewer than ten thousand speakers, and that a process of intergenerational language shift toward Chinese is firmly underway in many regions. Huang (2003: 4) adds that “the minority nationalities lack confidence in their own mother tongues” and believe that “mastery of Chinese will help them secure more opportunities,” and he comments that “[t]his has brought the minority nationalities to a crisis with respect to their mother tongues and . . . to lose confidence in the future of their mother tongues”. Huang finally reports that since 2002, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has been working with the State

Commission of Minority Affairs and UNESCO on “programs aimed at rescuing and documenting these endangered languages” (Huang, 2003: 5), but given the powerful economic and political dynamics at work, documentation rather than rescue may have more success.

Perhaps the most direct application of linguistics in relation to minority languages in China has been in the phonological and grammatical descriptions of these languages, a whole series of which have been published by the Central University of Nationalities Press in Beijing. Minority language or minority education issues are explored in journals such as *Minzu Jiaoyu Yanjiu* (*Journal of Research on Education for Ethnic Minorities*), *Minzu Yuwen* (*Ethnic Languages*) and *Guangxi Minzu Yanjiu* (*Studies of Ethnicity in Guangxi*).

Applied Linguistics and Foreign Language Teaching

To understand the role of applied linguistics in foreign language education, it is necessary to also consider the history of China’s international relations and foreign policy. In broad terms, one can identify six phases of foreign language education since 1949 (Lam, 2002, 2005) and these are illustrated in [Table 1](#) below.

Russian lessons were first broadcast in Beijing in 1949, and in the early 1950s, in line with its political orientation, China promoted Russian in education. In 1950, Russian departments were established in 19 higher-education colleges, and Russian training courses were organized in several party, government, and military sections. By the following year, these courses had been set up in at least 34 universities and colleges. The emphasis on Russian continued until 1956–1957 when China’s foreign policy moved away from the Soviet Union. From that point onward, English replaced Russian as the most important foreign language in China’s schools. In 1957, a draft syllabus for teaching English in junior secondary school was distributed, and in 1960, the Beijing Foreign Language School piloted the teaching of English from Primary 3. In 1961, the syllabus for English majors at university level was designed, and in 1962, the first English syllabus for non-English majors in science and technology was published.

The promotion of English at this time might have continued unabated but for the Cultural Revolution, which broke out in 1966 and swept throughout the country. During this period, all academic learning (including foreign language learning) was condemned, although Zhou Enlai, China’s Premier from 1949 to 1976, managed to deploy a small number of students to jobs requiring foreign languages. In 1971, in the midst of the Cultural Revolution, China was recognized as a member of the United Nations, and in 1972 Richard Nixon, then President of the United States of America, visited China, establishing a new era of United States–China diplomacy. The biggest breakthrough in foreign language teaching, however, came after the Cultural Revolution, when Deng Xiaoping announced his policy of the Four Modernizations in 1978. In the same year, plans to teach foreign languages from primary school were announced, and the recruitment of foreign teachers to China resumed. Throughout the 1980s, much work was done in drafting or revising syllabi, developing materials and tests, and training teachers at various educational levels, including universities.

To support these developments after 1978, there was an urgent need for educators trained in linguistics, and it was at this time that ‘applied linguistics’ for foreign language teaching was established as an academic discipline. According to Wang (personal communication, 2003), Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GUFS) was the very first institution to offer a Master’s program in Applied Linguistics in 1978, followed by a Diploma in Applied Linguistics in 1980 and a Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Linguistics in 1986. The first conference on ‘Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching (ELT)’

Table 1 Six phases in foreign language education in China after 1949

Historical period	Phase in foreign language education	Years
Before the Cultural Revolution	1. The Interlude with Russian	Early 1950s
	2. The back-to-English movement	1957-1955
During the Cultural Revolution	3. Repudiation of foreign learning	1966-1970
	4. English for renewing ties with the West	1971-1975

After the Cultural Revoltuon	5. English for modernization	1977-1990
	6. English for international stature	From 1991

was held at Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute (the predecessor to GUFS) in 1980, with participants from 22 higher-education institutions in China and three institutions from Hong Kong (the University of Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the Hong Kong Polytechnic). In the same year, foreign language specialists from China visited the Hong Kong Examinations Authority for advice on test design, and materials development teams in various foreign languages were set up at many universities. In 1984, research projects on various aspects of learning English at university level were conducted. In 1985, an ELT conference at the Guangzhou Foreign Language Institute attracted applied linguists such as Michael Halliday, Henry Widdowson, Peter Strevens, and Alan Maley. Around this time, English specialists from China also began to travel abroad more frequently, and in 1986, the first official delegation from China attended the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) conference in Anaheim, California, and presented the 'College English' syllabus for China. In the same year, Fu Ke (1986) published his influential history of foreign language teaching in China (see Sichuan Foreign Language Institute [1993] for a chronology of events in foreign language teaching).

By the early 1990s, applied linguistics had been established as a field of academic activity in China, and a number of Chinese scholars sent overseas for training in the 1970s had returned with new perspectives on foreign language education (Gui, 2002: 2). The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 also provided an opportunity for China to adopt an increasingly international outlook and further expand foreign language education, especially with reference to English. While work on English language curricula at tertiary level continued, attention now turned to English teaching in schools. In May 1990, new guidelines for teaching English in primary school were issued, followed in 1992 by a new syllabus for junior secondary school and, in 1993, for senior secondary school (later revised in 1996). Further international links have also been recently established, and in 2000, the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) endorsed the establishment of a China branch. In August 2002, the first IATEFL China conference was held in Tonghua in Jilin province. The year 2002 also saw China joining the International Association of Applied Linguists (AILA) under the aegis of the Chinese English Language Education Association (CELEA).

In China, it is common practice for the government to seek advice from several institutions in different cities to draft syllabi and to develop and pilot materials before they are adopted nationally. In recent decades, key institutions from throughout China have contributed to the national initiatives in the teaching of English and other foreign languages, and thus to 'applied linguistics' in the context of foreign language teaching. Individual institutions have also played an important role in this process, including Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, as mentioned above. GUFS now houses the nationally recognized Center for Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. A key role has also been played by Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) and the Shanghai International Studies University. Beijing Foreign Studies University houses the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP), the leading publisher of foreign language and applied linguistics materials. The press also sponsors and organizes national conferences on English language teaching in collaboration with the BFSU and the CELEA. Beijing Foreign Studies University is also the home of the National Research Center for Foreign Language Education, which was established at BFSU in March 2000 to conduct research on foreign language education and bilingualism.

Although Chinese 'applied linguistics' in the arena of foreign language teaching did not achieve academic recognition until the late 1970s, it has been professionalizing very rapidly, both through domestic innovations as well as through the education of many linguists overseas. A number of major universities in China now recognize applied linguistics as a distinct academic field. Major journals based in China dealing with foreign language education include *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, *Modern Foreign Languages*, *Foreign Language Research*, and *Journal of the Foreign Language World* (Gao, Li, and Lu, 2001).

Conclusion

In the sections above, we have attempted to locate our discussion of applied linguistics in China with reference both to the long tradition of Chinese language study and to the recent history of Chinese politics and society. The survey of issues we present in this article indicates that, in recent decades, there have been three broad areas where the influence of applied linguistics (in theory, practice, or both) has been felt: applied linguistics and the Chinese language; applied linguistics and minority languages; and applied linguistics and foreign language education.

With reference to Chinese, initiatives in applied linguistics have focused on the teaching and assessment of Putonghua and Standard Chinese to speakers of other dialects and languages and have also involved advances in Chinese information technology. With reference to minority language studies, linguistics has been applied to the description and archiving of such languages, as well as to issues of bilingualism, linguistic description, and language maintenance and loss. At present, applied linguistics in the field of English language teaching displays the greatest international orientation in terms of theory and practice, as might be expected. In the decades ahead there may be increased contacts between these three strands of 'applied' activities as interest in both linguistics and applied linguistics is likely to remain strong in an era of increasing internationalization. Whether that proves to be the case is likely to depend substantially on the degree of institutional support and 'academic space' granted by the educational authorities (in what is still a largely centrally organized educational system) for linguistics, both 'pure' and 'applied.'

See also: Chao Yuen Ren (1892–1982); China: Language Situation; Chinese; Endangered Languages; Language Education Policy in China; Language Planning and Policy: Models; Lingua Francas as Second Languages; Minorities and Language; Wang Li (1900–1986).

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