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# English in China today

KINGSLEY BOLTON AND DAVID GRADDOL

The current popularity of English in China is unprecedented, and has been fuelled by the recent political and social development of Chinese society

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## Introduction

According to a 2010 *China Daily* article, the number of English learners in China is now around 400 million, approximately one third of China's population (see also Wei and Su, this issue). The importance of English in the state education system has been supplemented by the rapid growth of privately-run language schools and training institutes across the country in recent years. The same article quoted a comment by Ms Xiao Yan, the public relations manager of the Wall Street English language school chain, who gave her explanation for the current popularity of English in the following terms:

More and more importance has been given to English after China carried out the policy of reform and opening up to the outside world in the late 1970s. And accompanying China's rise on the world stage in recent years are growing connections of commerce and culture with other countries, especially those developed English-speaking countries [...] The entire Chinese society attaches high importance to the English study as sometimes it even plays a vital role for a person who plans to pursue further education and seek a better career. There is no doubt that people who have a good command of English are more competitive than their peers. (*China Daily*, 2010a)

The same article then went on to note that China's training market had an estimated value of 300 billion yuan (US\$ 47 billion) in 2010, of which the English-language training market accounted for around 30 billion yuan (US\$ 4.7 billion), with the cost of one six-hour course in a Beijing language school at 300 yuan (US\$ 47). The link between money and English has been imbricated in the discourse of English in the Middle Kingdom since the

days of 'pidgin' (from 'business') English, but is alive and well in current discourses, not least because of the perceived instrumental and pragmatic attractions of the language. In a more recent article in the same newspaper, Mr Le Yucheng, a high-ranking official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, compared the number of English learners



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in China with the numbers whose living standards had improved during recent decades, with both numbers estimated to reach 400 million, and commented that '[w]ithout learning from the West, we could not have raised so many people out of poverty' (*China Daily*, 2011a). The perceived link between Chinese modernity, prosperity and the English language is a strand of discourse that runs through many commentaries on English in contemporary China, but for many academic commentators it may also be a link of suspect validity (see Qu and Lin & Seargeant, this issue). Notwithstanding this, however, the scale of the spread of English in China in recent decades has taken most observers by surprise. In this article, we aim to sketch out what we see as a number of the most significant trends relating to the sociolinguistics of English in Chinese society, together with a short summary of relevant facts about what it is we know and what we don't know about the unfolding story of English in China today.

## English in China's past

Until recently at least, little scholarly attention had been paid to the historical background to the English language in China. However, as Bolton (2002, 2003) points out, the language has had a lengthy, complicated and often forgotten history that began in the early seventeenth century with the first documented account of linguistic and cultural contact, through the era of Chinese pidgin English from the early eighteenth century to the recent past, to the Republican period between 1911 and 1949, when English was widely learnt in missionary schools and the thirteen Christian colleges, many of which have become leading universities in contemporary China.<sup>1</sup> By the Republican period, however, in addition to missionary initiatives in English studies, an indigenous tradition of English language teaching had established itself, which began in the late-Qing era and extended into the years of the Nationalist government. China's own initiatives in teaching English began in 1862, with the founding of an interpreters' college, the *Tongwen Guan* in Peking (Adamson, 2002; Lam, 2002). The *Tongwen Guan* taught technical subjects in addition to languages, including courses in anatomy, chemistry, geology, mineralogy and physics. Similar schools were then established in other parts of China, including Shanghai and Guangzhou. Shanghai's Foreign Language School (*Waiguo Yuyan Wenzhi Xueguan*), offered a range of courses relevant to the needs of Shanghai's expanding business community,

including Chinese studies, history and foreign languages. The school was later renamed the School for Dispersing Languages (*Guang Fangyan Guan*) and was merged with the Jiangnan Arsenal, which trained students in armaments, mechanical engineering, and shipbuilding (Bolton, 2003).

In the last decades of the Qing dynasty, large numbers of Chinese-run 'modern schools' (*xue-tang*) were established in cities like Shanghai in competition with the mission schools, in response to a growing nationalism across China. According to the new national syllabus introduced in 1903, the three core subjects to be taught in schools were Chinese, mathematics and foreign languages. The number of government-funded schools increased very rapidly and soon outstripped the mission schools. Eventually, education in all its aspects increasingly came under the control of Nationalist governments, operating mainly from Guangzhou in the early period of the Republic, and later from Nanking. By 1927, the climate of Chinese opinion had turned against mission schools, which were seen as manifestations of 'inner imperialism' (Ross, 1993: 34).

## English in contemporary China

A number of trends emerged in foreign-language teaching after the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. From the 1950s to the 1990s, Chinese education experienced a roller-coaster ride of changing policy directives in foreign language education. In the early 1950s the Russian language was promoted enthusiastically, and many English language teachers turned to teaching Russian, and in 1954, the government decided that only Russian would be taught in secondary schools throughout the nation. This decision was partly reversed two years later, however, when the Ministry of Education announced that junior secondary schools would be permitted to teach either English or Russian, although English teaching would be initially limited to those schools in the major cities that possessed sufficient teachers (Adamson, 2002). In the early sixties, from 1961 to 1966, this policy was somewhat reversed when political schisms developed between the PRC and the Soviet Union, and many Russian teachers were retrained as English language teachers. In the Cultural Revolution, which reached its height in the decade between 1966 and 1976, the learning of English was outlawed in many parts of the country, at a time when many schools and universities largely ceased to function as educational institutions. The Cultural

Revolution ended with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the coming to power of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, when the economic and political agenda of contemporary China began to be set. After Deng assumed power, China announced an 'Open Door' policy, which was accompanied by the revival of the teaching of English and other foreign languages, including Russian, Japanese and French (Adamson, 2002). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the popularity of English grew rapidly and those sectors of the economy dealing with international trade and tourism employed increasing numbers of interpreters and translators. Lam (2002) suggests that, since the early 1990s, the educational push to promote English has been partly motivated by the aspiration to gain 'international stature', as seen in China's joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, and hosting the Olympic Games in 2008. At the level of the education system the push for English has been realised by measures to lower the age at which English is taught, and to ensure the importance of the subject through key examinations in the education system.

### English in China's education system

Since 2001, it has been the official policy that English should be learnt from the age of 8 or 9 onwards, in Grade 3 of the national education system (Wang, 2007). In a school system where internal and external examinations are accorded high importance, the learning of English at school has led to the growing importance of the language for intra-national purposes, not least for the personal advancement and educational success of literally millions of Chinese students. The key importance of English in educational advancement can be seen in the National University Entrance Qualifying Exam (or *gaokao*), which this year was taken by over 9 million students (*China Daily*, 2012), who are tested in three subjects: Chinese, Maths and English. Understanding the place of English in the Chinese education system leading up to the National University Exam helps us understand much of the recent growth in English study.

What happens at the *gaokao* has created a wash-back effect through the whole education system in China, as parents across the country strive to give their children an educational advantage through arranging for early English tuition for their children, in kindergartens and other schools for very young learners. Today, the expectation that children should become familiar with English before

ever attending formal school has spread beyond areas such as Hong Kong, first to the main cities of China, and now to the tier two cities and beyond. This trend is undeniably still a feature of middle-class aspirations, but in China the middle class has been growing strongly over the last ten years, and English with it. On the mainland, one of the fastest-growing sectors in private education is that of kindergarten schools, many of which proclaim the ability to teach English to Chinese toddlers. All of this reflects the way that English language has become one of the key strands of modern Chinese education, alongside literacy in Chinese and maths. The private sector in education has grown very fast and exists at all levels of study. In addition to maids, nurseries and kindergartens, there exist many chains of language schools and tutorial colleges at which children and older students supplement their school study. There is also a state-run system of extra-curricular classes (in all subjects) at 'children's palaces' for 'gifted students' (Graddol, 2012). The national policy of beginning the teaching of English in mid primary school thus greatly underestimates the likely number of children learning English in China, and the number of hours that are devoted to this endeavour.

Once at university, the need for English does not diminish, and all students at university in China, irrespective of their major area of study, are required to study the language, not only to enter university but also to graduate. Those majoring in subjects other than English are required to sit the College English Test (CET) before graduation. Students with excellent English skills may opt to become English Majors, but many others are currently choosing a range of more 'practical' or 'valuable' subjects, such as business, economics, finance, etc., which is currently leading to something of a crisis in foreign language schools across the country (see Qu and Dai, this issue). It is also relevant to note that China's universities have expanded greatly since the early 1980s, and currently around 22% of high school students progress to university, contributing to a total of more than 25 million post-secondary enrolments in higher education, creating in China the largest population of university students in the world (OECD, 2009: 180). For most of these students, their study involves the learning of English, and one result of this seems to be that more and more students are learning English and learning English well. Coupled with this is the fact that in recent years more and more of these educational high achievers have been learning English to go overseas for

further education in the form of Master's and PhD programmes in US and European universities.

## English for educational migration

In the last twenty years, hundreds of thousands of Chinese students have gone to the United States, Britain and Australia in order to take degree-level or postgraduate courses in a wide range of university subjects. Exact statistics are not easily available, but one 1997 report indicated that between 1978 and 1997, 270,000 mainland Chinese students had gone abroad to study, 40 per cent of them to the United States (Tang, 1997: 10). The same article noted that after 1989 many Chinese students had opted to stay abroad, and 53,000 young Chinese had succeeded in gaining their green cards to remain in the United States. A 2001 report from the *People's Daily* claimed that more than 400,000 Chinese students studied abroad between 1978 and 2000, and notes that some 110,000 have subsequently returned to China to start their careers (Yan, 2001).

Such figures might also be compared to those of a much earlier era, when the first generations of students went abroad in the late-Qing and Republican eras. In the years 1847–1953, for example, it was calculated that the total number of Chinese students who had studied in the United States amounted to only 50,000 (Chao, 1953). In 2000, according to the *New York Times* there were 50,000 Chinese students in the United States in that year alone, with 'more students at American universities from China than from any other country' (Rosenthal, 2001). A more recent report estimated that at present around 230,000 Chinese students were currently being educated abroad, and that by 2014 that figure was anticipated to climb steeply to around 600,000 (*China Daily*, 2011b). In recent years, top universities in the US, Europe and even Hong Kong have mounted recruitment drives for Master's and PhD students from Chinese universities, frequently offering generous scholarships to the best students. According to the available statistics, China (followed by India and South Korea) is the top source country for international students in the US. According to government statistics for 2010/11, during that year there were a total of 157,558 mainland Chinese students in the US, which accounted for 21.8% of foreign students in the country. If one includes Hong Kong and Taiwan, that figure then rises to 190,512, i.e. 26.3% of the total (Institute of International Education, 2012a). The recent rapid increase in

numbers of students from mainland China studying in the US can be seen from Figure 1 below.

The impact of Chinese students has also been felt in Europe over the past decade. According to official EU figures, the total number of Chinese students in the EU in 2010 was approximately 120,000, an increase of six times the figure for 2000. Those countries reporting the highest numbers of Chinese students were the UK (40% of the total for Europe), France (23%) and Germany (20%), followed by the Netherlands (4%), Italy, Ireland, Sweden (3% respectively), Finland, Cyprus and Denmark (between 1% and 2%), typically with business, economics and engineering the preferred subjects (European Commission, 2012).

At the same time, China's universities are also showing increased signs of internationalisation, and establishing increasing numbers of teaching programmes taught through the medium of English, partly in order to attract foreign students to China. In 2012–13, a number of leading universities are offering undergraduate medicine and surgery programmes taught in English for international students, including Fudan University in Shanghai, Nanjing Medical University, Nantong University, Sichuan University, Soochow University and Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, with a reported enrolment of more than 5,000 international medical students (many of whom are from South Asia) studying through English across the country (CUCAS, 2012). Other programmes that are offered through English now include business, economics and finance. One 2010 article from the government's New China News Agency noted that 'Chinese universities have increasingly begun to promote diversity on campus by teaching courses

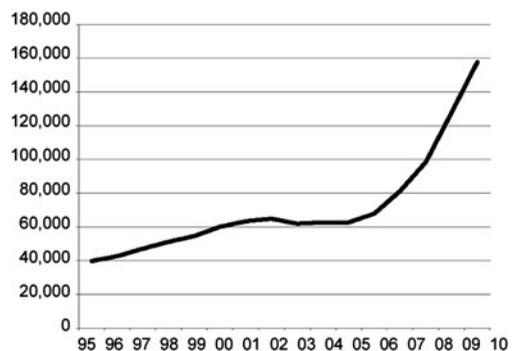


Figure 1. The numbers of mainland Chinese students at US universities (Institute of International Education, 2012b)

in English' and that China was now planning to attract 500,000 self-funding foreign students by 2020 (*China Daily*, 2010b). Despite such reports in the official media, very little research seems to have been carried out on investigating the sociolinguistic realities of such initiatives, and similarly, detailed basic research into the reality of English language learning by Chinese students, across a wide variety of locations and tiers of education, also seems to be in short supply.

## English in China: What we know, and what we don't know

For some years now, China has been cited as a major English-learning society, where the numbers of English learners have been estimated at more than 200 million people (Bolton, 2003). Such estimates have typically been based on somewhat patchy data from the Chinese education system, and have been difficult to evaluate. However, according to Wei and Su (this issue), there is some hard data available, in the form of the results of the national survey of languages, which was completed between September 1999 and March 2001. Even though this data is ten years old, it does provide very valuable insights into the sociolinguistics of English in the PRC, and, from this, it is possible to extrapolate into the present, in broad terms at least. What Wei and Su highlight in their article is that, around 2000, an estimated 49% (c. 416 million) had studied one or more foreign languages, and, of these, around 94% had studied English, 7% Russian, and 2.5% Japanese, which yields a total of some 390 million people who had learnt some English.

However, one important finding derived from the survey is that the numbers of people who actually find a significant use for English in their daily lives is a small fraction of the total that had studied the language, with a mere 7% reporting that they 'often' use the language, compared with 23% for 'sometimes', and 69% for 'seldom'. In contrast to such Outer Circle, English-using societies in Asia as India, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines, it seems that the use of English in China is restricted to a small number of domains. Rather obviously, the main domain of contemporary use is education, although with a role for English on a smaller scale in international business and trade, hotels and tourism, and such communications as the English language media in China including the *China Daily*, *Beijing Review*, China Central Television Station (CCTV) broadcasts, etc.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, it appears that we now have a good deal of information about the spread of English in education, but much less information about the role of English in the everyday lives of Chinese people in China. In particular, one is left wondering about the language worlds of the millions of young people that have very recently learnt the language at school and university. In comparison with their parents and grandparents, they now inhabit a very different linguistic world, where they are able to bilingually negotiate entertainment and information through DVDs, the Internet and all the electronic gadgetry of post-modern China. The linguistic worlds that these young people inhabit are also influenced by the changing multilingual ecology of China itself, where regional languages and local dialects are giving way to the spread of *Putonghua*, which is now being promoted vigorously by the government across the whole country. At a linguistic level, there is also the issue of whether an indigenous variety of Chinese English is emerging through the wide use of the language in education, with distinctive features at the levels of phonology, lexis, grammar and discourse (Kirkpatrick, 2007; Xu, 2010; Ao and Low, this issue). The linguistic impact of English is visible not only in terms of a localised version of English, however, but also in a range of communications – including the Internet and China's blogosphere – where code-switching and code-mixing are now occurring with increasing visibility (Zhang, this issue).

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to sketch out a range of basic issues relating to English in China today. What is clear from current research is that the greatest visibility of English as a working language for Chinese people is in the domain of education, both for domestic purposes and for international educational migration and study. As the article has also indicated, our current knowledge about other uses of the language within China is limited, and, given this, the opportunities for researching Chinese Englishes are many, as relatively little research has been done outside universities and colleges. In particular, there is an evident need to carry out more field-based sociolinguistic research.

The linguistic landscapes of the major Chinese cities – with street signs and decorative shop signs in English – attest to the recent influence of English on urban life, but the impact of this on individual Chinese or groups of Chinese remains

unclear. In this context, it would be very useful to have focused studies of young bilinguals working in international companies, joint-ventures, and trading companies to investigate how much English is used and for what purposes in China's growing business sector. In similar fashion, in the electronic media and publishing, detailed fieldwork could throw a greater light on the role of English in China's international communications.

In many respects, what we don't know about English in China today greatly outstrips our current state of knowledge. Part of the reason for this may be the difficulty of accessing reliable information in China, where there is less transparency in governance than is the case in most western countries. Only a limited range of statistics are published on many aspects of social development, including education, and there are also limits on independent research, especially by foreign organisations. Add to this the reluctance of the private sector to divulge commercially sensitive information, and there is a shortage of the kind of basic data which would allow a fuller assessment of the numbers of English speakers in China at different levels of proficiency, and of historical and future trends. For these reasons, many things we might wish to know we do not know, and cannot know, about China. Another reason, however, may simply be the reluctance of researchers to undertake fieldwork research that might contribute to a more detailed, finer-grained body of sociolinguistic research in this area (or that the burden of heavy teaching loads restricts them to the university precincts). In many respects, despite the astonishing number of learners, English is still a 'foreign' language for most Chinese, associated with foreign powers and foreign ways outside the firewall of the nation. Nevertheless the numbers of young bilinguals coming of age are simply astonishing, leaving the linguistic observer to wonder at the ruptures of history and the impact of the changing linguistic world of the society on its younger citizens. This is occurring at a time when China has gained status as an economic and political world power, and is crucially engaged in embracing its own version of modernity at a pace unprecedented in the history of the world. ■

## Note

1 The thirteen Protestant 'Christian colleges' that were set up at the turn of the twentieth century had a profound influence on Chinese education. These included St John's University in Shanghai (from 1879), Hangchow University (1897), Soochow University (from 1901), Shantung Christian University ('Cheeloo' University,

from 1902), Lingnan University (previously 'Canton Christian College', from 1903), the University of Shanghai (1906), University of Nanking (1910), West China Union University (1910) at Chengdu, Yenching University (at Beijing, from 1912), Fukien Christian University (1915), Ginling College (1915), Hwa Nan Women's College (at Fuzhou, from 1921) and Hua Chung University (at Wuhan, from 1927). In addition to these thirteen colleges, Tsinghua University was set up in 1911, and partly staffed by western missionaries, and run along American lines (Bolton, 2003).

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