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Introduction: interdisciplinary perspectives on English in China

KINGSLEY BOLTON and Q.S TONG

The starting-point for this special issue on ‘English in China: interdisciplinary perspectives’ arose out of discussions between ourselves in the summer of the year 2000.¹ As academics based within the English department of the oldest university in what is not the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of China, a recurrent concern in both our teaching and research has been the history and development of cultural, linguistic, and literary contact between China and ‘the West’. Given the current rapid spread of English in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), we were particularly interested in how that contact has been mediated by the English language and ‘English studies’ and the current status, functions and features of English in China. Initial discussions with colleagues in the HKSAR and at universities in China revealed similar interests among many of those we contacted, and in the fall of 2000 we sent out a general call for papers to English departments throughout mainland China.

There was an enthusiastic response to this call from a wide range of scholars active within a range of disciplines related to English studies.² Indeed, so much so that the papers presented here represent only a subset of the interesting and topical papers that were submitted. With many good papers to choose from, the question of selection proved to be a formidable editorial task. In the event, our belief, and our hope, is that the 13 substantive contributions here can do justice to the range of responses we received, many of which reflect the interdisciplinary nature of English studies throughout China today.

Such studies are interdisciplinary nature in the sense that the roles assigned to the English language and English literature within China have a long and complicated history throughout the Chinese academy, where key-issues related to foreign-learning and foreign literatures have had an immense socio-political importance since the eras of the opium wars, ‘unequal treaties’, and ‘self-strengthening’ movements of the late nineteenth century. As a number of papers presented here reflect, such issues were closely linked to questions of modernity and modernization. In the late Qing dynasty (1860-1911), a feudal, pre-modern and literate (though elitist) culture, which has been intermittently the wonder of the West over at least three centuries, was increasingly faced with the onslaught of European and American modernity in all its forms – economic, military, technological, religious and secular.

After the Second Opium War (1856-60) and the spread of ‘treaty ports’, coastal and inland, throughout China, the English language began to be widely taught in missionary schools and colleges. Parallel to this, various missionary translation projects sought to diffuse ‘useful’ and ‘improving’ literature through Chinese. At the same time, it was generally realized in China that an adequate knowledge of Western languages were urgently needed in order to deal with China’s relationships with the Western powers. In response to the increasing interactions between China and Western countries, on the diplomatic front as well as in trade, the Chinese government established schools of foreign languages, including *Tongwen Guan* in Beijing (1862), *Guang Fangyan Guan* in Shanghai (1863), and *Guangzhou Tongwen Guan* in Guangzhou (1864). In 1867, *Kiangnan Arsenal* was founded in Shanghai, and its translation bureau began to print works in Chinese on such topics as engineering, military science, and natural science. Missionaries were also instrumental in the translation of Western fiction, and more than 600 works of fiction were translated into Chinese between 1875 and 1911, including such novels and plays as *Gulliver's Travels*, *Hamlet*, *Hard Times*, *Ivanhoe*, *Jane Eyre*, *Man and Superman*,

Robinson Crusoe, School for Scandal, Sherlock Holmes, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, The Call of the Wild, The Scarlet Letter, and Uncle Tom's Cabin (Bolton, 2002). Soon their efforts were matched and even surpassed by the translations of Chinese intellectuals such as Yan Fu (1853-1921) and Lin Shu (1852-1924). Lin alone was responsible for the rendering of 156 literary works into Chinese, including 93 by such British authors as Shakespeare, Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, Jonathan Swift, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, Walter Scott, and Charles Dickens (Zhou and Tong, this issue).

Later, the defining moment for student radicalism in China occurred on May 4th, 1919, when Peking students protested against the terms of the Treaty of Versailles which handed German holdings in Shantung (Shandong) to Japan. The 'May Fourth Movement' that arose out of these protests marked the beginnings of movements in politics, literature and creative writing that would influence Chinese intellectuals across a number of political spectra (Tong and Zhou, 2002). Then, as perhaps now, China's relations with the outside world were seen as a major, possibly *the* major, domestic issue faced by society. In the 80-odd years that have followed, through periods of warlordism and Nationalism and Communism, the dissemination of foreign languages in China has been seen as both a matter of key political concern, and as an issue of important cultural debate.

China's reception of the West in much of the twentieth century has been ambivalent, as has China's response to its own tradition. While the West has been considered, both historically and strategically, as China's 'other', the presence of the West in China, in particular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has been a major force in the formation of China's modern consciousness. Western literary traditions, especially the English literary tradition, have served as an attractive alternative to indigenous forms of literary production. What has proven to be most significant and productive has been China's enthusiastic embrace of modern Western literary genres, largely unknown in China before the twentieth century, such as the modern novel, *vers fibre*, modern drama, and modern criticism. Here, it is worth noting, the adoption of Western literary ideas and modes of creative production has been a manifestation of China's readiness to accept some of the values embedded in these literary forms. It is in this context that English, as both a linguistic and cultural formation, has been a crucial focus of attention in China's modern social experience. Today, it is evident that China's readiness to respond to Western literary trends and ideas has not waned. Since the implementation of Deng Xiaoping's 'open door' policy in the early 1980s, China has witnessed a new period of intellectual liberalism in which many recent Western literary productions and critical theories have been translated, mostly from or via English, into the Chinese language and made available to the Chinese reading public. There have also been great changes in political and official attitudes towards the learning and teaching of English since 1978 and the propagation of the 'open door' policy throughout China. As Lam (this issue) indicates, since the early 1980s, English has regained and strengthened its position as the main foreign language in secondary education, and is now seen as important both for 'modernisation' and for 'international stature'. China's current quest for an increased international presence is highlighted both by its recent accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), and its hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games (Pang, Zheng, and Zhou, this issue).

Given the background to contemporary English studies in China outlined above, our belief is that the 13 papers present a range of perspectives on a number of important issues. Our intention in making the selection was to present a body of work of interest to both academics within China and to those in the international academic community, including Europe and North America as

well as Africa and Asia, wherever scholars are interested in a world Englishes approach to this subject.

The papers in this issue have been grouped into three major categories, 'Historical and sociological perspectives', 'Education and linguistics', and 'Literature and cultural studies'. The first paper by Bolton adopts a socio-historical approach in examining the 'partially-erased, partially-remembered history' of English in China from the seventeenth century to the present. In contrast, the two papers that follow are both concerned with contemporary sociolinguistic realities. The contribution from Pang, Zhou and Zheng focuses on the likely effects of the PRC's recent accession to the WTO on English language teaching in China, and concludes with a call to strengthen the teaching of 'business English' and related subjects at university and college level. Guo and Huang's paper on the English media in post-Mao China presents both a general survey of issues and practice, and the results of a detailed study of selected Chinese- and English-language newspapers in mainland China.

The second category of papers comprises three papers on English in education, and two on language and linguistics. Adamson historicises the history of English in education in a sweeping discussion that moves from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, while Lam presents the results of interview research that reveal a steadily improving climate for English in schools and universities throughout the recent period. Cheng's authoritative paper on the status of English in Chinese universities, written in part with reference to the rich intellectual history of English studies at *Beida* (Peking University), asserts the importance of English studies as an expression of humanistic and philosophical education, training in which may lead to the promotion of the responsible citizenship of students. From linguistics, Kirkpatrick and Xu review recent debates on the recognition of 'China English' as a legitimate nativised variety of English, and follow this with the close examination of contrastive rhetoric in English and Chinese. Huang's paper surveys the immense influence and importance of Hallidayan (systemic-functional) linguistics in the PRC, and presents a detailed account of the popularity of this approach among scholars throughout China.

The third section on 'Literature and cultural studies' includes five papers on distinct yet related topics. Zou presents a fascinating account of a memoir on hunting by a little known (and somewhat eccentric) professor of English from Tsinghua University, John Wong-Quincey. Here, Wong-Quincey's 'cultural hybridity' is read against the postcolonial theories of Homi Bhabha and Louis Althusser. Zhang's contribution jumps to the present to examine the work of the most acclaimed Chinese English writer of recent times, Ha Jin (Xuefei Jin). In a stylistic analysis of Ha Jin's bilingual creativity in the novella *In the Pond*, Zhang argues that Jin transcreates his native Chinese experience to form an indigenized narrative style through the use of nativised discourse patterns, rhetorical strategies, speech acts, and a range of other linguistic devices. Yin and Chen, writing as practising literature teachers from within China, present an impassioned argument in favour of English literary studies against the more 'pragmatic' approaches advocated by those in favour of a 'market-oriented' approach (see also Cheng, and Pang *et al.* in this context). Hung presents a insightful overview of translation studies in twentieth-century China which includes discussion of the role of fiction translation, translation from Chinese into English, and the relationship between translation and the learning of English. The final paper in this section, by Zhou and Tong, considers English as a cultural formation as well as an academic discipline in China at three different historical periods: from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s, and from the end of the Cultural Revolution to the present time.

There is little doubt that English will continue to play a major role in China's continual engagement with the West and with the world. With China's emergence as a world power, with its increasing integration into the world system, China will need English to project its own presence on the regional and the international scene. It may also extend the use of English as an international language, for example, as an additional language of commerce, communication, and education. In time, China may even, as in so many Asian countries, provide new voices in world literature written in English. The articles collected in this volume examine the roles and functions of English in China (and Chinese Englishes) from the seventeenth century to today from a range of interdisciplinary perspectives. Taken together, these papers, we believe, serve not only to chart the past and report the present, but also to suggest the future.

NOTES

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2. In this special issue, the papers presented all deal with English in the People's Republic of China, or with the literature of writers from mainland China. An earlier special issue of *World Englishes* dealing with English in Hong Kong was published in 2000 (Bolton, 2000).

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