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Researching English in contemporary China

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ABSTRACT: This article provides an introduction to the range of research issues covered by the contributions to this special issue on English in contemporary China. It is suggested that the role of English in Chinese society today cannot be considered in isolation from the sociolinguistic background, as well as the social and political context of contemporary Chinese society. With reference to the present-day sociolinguistic dynamics of China, an important issue is the current spread of Putonghua as the national language across the nation, a process linked to the demands and exigencies of the state education system. With reference to the spread of English, one continuing issue is the relationship between the learning of English, and the actual use of the language. In this context, it is relevant to consider that, in recent decades, official policies to the language have drawn their motivation from both economic and political considerations, where various ideologies have played a role.

INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *World Englishes* on the topic of 'English in contemporary China' is intended to inform current research on the status and functions of English in mainland China today.¹ In many respects, China is a classic Expanding Circle society, where English has long had the status of a foreign language, although the effects of globalization, including increased migration and travel and access to the Internet and international media have also had an impact. Nevertheless, a full understanding of the status and functions of English in contemporary China also involve an understanding of the wider sociolinguistic background in contemporary Chinese society, not least with reference to the internal sociolinguistic dynamics of the nation. Indeed, at an official level, issues relating to the English language have been seen as far less important, in recent years than other language policy issues, not least the promotion of Putonghua as a national language throughout a geographically vast and ethnically diverse society.

Over the last few decades the Chinese state has made significant strides with regards to implementing its national language policy, especially with its promotion of Putonghua (Mandarin). Wang and Yuan's (2013) report on the 1997 The National Working Conference on Spoken and Written Language emphasized the perceived importance of this official goal, which avowed two major objectives:

[T]he first objective incorporating the removal of dialect barriers in communication and initiation of *Putonghua's* nationwide popularization should be achieved by 2010; the second objective including complete nationwide popularization for *Putonghua* and removal of dialect barriers in communication should be achieved by the middle of the 21st century. (Wang and Yuan 2013: 27)

However, despite vigorous attempts in implementing its language policy promoting Putonghua, the 2000 survey by the State Language Commission found that only around 53 per cent of the Chinese population reported an ability to communicate in Putonghua. Since then, there has been strong evidence that the promotion of Putonghua has succeeded in encouraging the spread of the language among younger generation of school-age students across China (Wang and Yuan 2013: 28-36).

The policy of promoting Putonghua in education has been matched by a similar campaign in the mass media, and provincial and city authorities have strongly encouraged the use of Putonghua, rather than regional languages, on local television and radio stations. This promotion of Putonghua has not always been smooth, and has met with some resistance, most notably on the occasion of the 2010 demonstrations in Guangzhou, when many local citizens protested against proposals for a major Guangzhou's television station to broadcast primarily in Putonghua (Liang 2015). Despite such occasional resistance, and the lack of reliable data, it seems apparent from all recent reports that the promotion of the national language is currently achieving a high degree of success, at a time of increased mobility in the Chinese workplace and in the educational domain as well. Although there is still very little sociolinguistic data available on the current rate of language shift

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from regional and minority languages towards Putonghua, it is clear that such a shift is in rapid progress in China today, and that this general shift provides an important strand in the sociolinguistic background to the role of English in contemporary China.

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

In recent decades, the Chinese government has increasingly placed an important value on the promotion of English in the national school curriculum. Since the opening of China in the late 1970s, the government's policy on English in the national curriculum has always been motivated according to the political as well as economic considerations. For example, in 1978, the Ministry of Education explained the rationale for promoting the teaching of English in terms of an important tool for 'international class struggle', and for 'cultural, scientific, and technological exchange'. Later, during the period of economic development led by Deng Xiao Ping, policies toward English cited economic rather than political factors, as in the case of the 1992 and 1993 English syllabuses, which stipulated that English was beneficial in helping to the country to meet the needs of reform and internationalization (Adamson and Morris 1997: 17-23). More recently, the 2000 school syllabus highlighted the role of English in role in international exchange and modernization. In the early 2000s, the push for English instruction at schools was evidently motivated by China's international aspirations, as seen in China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, and hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games, which even moved the Beijing authorities to promote the learning of English in order to greet foreign tourists and athletes (the 'Beijing Speaks English' campaign).

More recently, however, the promotion of English has met a degree of rhetorical resistance at least, with reports that the Head of the National Research Institute in China stated that English-language studies were potentially 'destructive' to China's education system (South China Morning Post 2013). In the same year, educational reforms changing the emphasis given to English language in the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE, or *gaokao*) were also announced. Since 2001, the official policy in the Chinese education system had been that English should be learnt from Grade 3, from around the age of 8, and that English, Mathematics and Chinese were compulsory subjects tested in the NCEE of equal importance (Wang 2007). Under the new system, changes to the NCEE, to be implemented between 2016 and 2017, will then see a reduced emphasis on the required scores for English. A number of China's newspapers have described the NCEE reforms as a positive development, suggesting that a reduction of emphasis on English might represent a growing confidence in the rise of China (BBC Chinese 21 October 2013).

Despite this, the English language still has an important status in China, and Wei and Su (this issue) estimate the number of people having learnt at least some English, even 15 years ago, to be in the region of 400 million, around one third of the national population. Similar totals for those knowing English in China have been reported worldwide in recent years, although such reports have often ignored the limited use of the language in mainland China, as opposed to its widespread propagation in education. In their 2012 article, Wei and Su noted that – in the national 2000 survey – only 7 per cent of those respondents that had studied the language reported using English 'often', while 69 per cent responded that they 'seldom' used the language. In brief, it seems clear that, despite its popularity, the use of English is restricted to a small number of domains in contemporary China, namely education, business and commerce and certain areas of the media. In this context, one central, and at times perplexing, research issue is – given the astonishing statistics of English in mainland China in terms of numbers of learners – how exactly is English actually used (experientially as well as imaginatively) within Chinese society (Bolton and Graddol 2012). A second key issue relates to the relationship between official policies and their implementation in actual linguistic behavior. As noted above, the promotion of English in recent years has been closely linked to a range of ideologies concerning the economic development and politics of China on the world stage. Following the opening of China in the 1980s and 1990s, such ideologies were typically linked to notions of development, modernization, and internationalization. Given China's new identity as an economic superpower, it is possible that official attitudes to English may change, not least at a time when the Education Minister has warned against the ill effects of 'Western values', and introduced new rules restricting the use of Western textbooks in Chinese classrooms (New York Times 2015).

The articles collected in this special issue may provide some answers to these key questions, as well as suggesting areas for future research. The article by Wei and Su on 'Surveying English across China' presents an analysis of data from the 2000 national survey relating to the use of English in seven major cities, while the article from Bolton and Botha focuses on issues related to English in China's universities from a historical and contemporary perspective. This is followed by articles by Ai and You on the grammatical features of English on the Chinese Internet, by Zhang on online multilingual creativity, and by Dai on the teaching of creative writing at a Chinese university. This is followed by an analysis of the politics of China's English language media by Alvaro, and an autobiographical essay on writing in English in China by the author Lijia Zhang. Finally, the research bibliography compiled by Bolton, Botha and Zhang is intended to serve as a guide to the research literature on English in contemporary China.

NOTE

1. A number of the articles included in this special issue are based on presentations first made at the International Association for World Englishes (IAWE) Conference held at City University of Hong Kong and Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou on December 6-9, 2012. Interested readers may also wish to compare this current special issue with an earlier special issue on 'English in China: Interdisciplinary perspectives', edited by Kingsley Bolton and Q.S. Tong, and published in *World Englishes*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2002. It should also be noted that this special issue focuses only on English in mainland China, and does not attempt to survey issues related to English in other parts of Greater China, including Hong Kong and Taiwan.

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