Social Construction of English Proficiency: A Historical Perspective


JIN HE

University of Cambridge
Faculty of Education
1 A Brief Background

Since the late nineteenth century when English language education started in China, it has been used as ‘a vehicle for political, economic, educational, and even individual transformation’ (Ross 1993: 17), shaping the life of many ordinary Chinese people. Today, English has assumed a status of unprecedented importance in China (Adamson 2002; Pang, et al. 2002). Some surveys have shown that the advent of the market economy and the marketisation of education after the issuance of the Open Door Policy in 1978 results in the ‘consecration’ of English in China, and that the ‘popularisation’ of the English language has generated an ‘English-only ideology’, which has permeated every aspect of social life (Lu and Zhang 2005; Ren 2005; Tang and Xie 2005). It can be seen that in contemporary China, the learning and use of English, which used to be expertise of a few people, has become a habitualised way of life for the general public and changed their ‘definition of the situation’ (Nash and Spradley 1976: vi). To some extent, English has become a determinant of social life in China (Adamson 2004). Hence, an investigation of English language education in China calls for a sociological approach to look critically at the ‘totality’ of relations, that is, a complex configuration of political, economic, cultural, and spatial relations to understand the social influences that help shape social life (Mandalios 2000). In view of this, I identify my research questions as: How are ideas about the English language socially constructed at various stages of history in China?

2. Language, Linguistic Capital, and Symbolic Power

This study looks at English language education in China from Bourdieu’s perspective. Conceiving of social practice in terms of the relationship between class habitus and current capital as realised within the specific logic of a given field, Bourdieu presents a theory with the power to illuminate the intrinsic relations between culture, class, and

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1 Translated from “唯英语论”. The first Chinese character means ‘unique, only’, the second two ‘English’, the last ‘view, opinion, idea’.
social structure without sacrificing their distinctive features. The notions of habitus, field, and capital thus constitute the pivotal conceptual apparatus in a general theory of sociology without overlooking the nuances of both structure and process.

Using the key concepts of his theory of practice, Bourdieu provides a sociological analysis and critique of a range of issues concerning the nature of language and language use. Linguistic utterances or expressions are understood as the product of the relation between a socially structured linguistic habitus and a value-laden linguistic market. The value of a language (or a language variety) depends on the legitimacy of it as recognised linguistic capital – ‘class-linked traits of speech differentially valued in a specific field or market’ (Collins 1993:118). Moreover, the distribution of linguistic capital is related in specific ways to the distribution of other forms of capital which is, in turn, related to the relations of power in specific time and space. Hence, ‘through speaking a language one is embedded in a universe of categorization, selective distinction, and evaluation’ (Hanks 2005:77).

At the core of language use is the exercise of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualised. The origin of symbolic power is an imposition of cultural arbitrary – the symbolic system of meanings (values, beliefs, norms, practices, etc.), and a projection of legitimacy which seeks to conceal the power relations that are the basis of its force (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Cicourel 1993).

Bourdieu asserts that ‘capital (or power) becomes symbolic capital … when it is misrecognised in its arbitrary truth as capital and recognised as legitimate’ (Bourdieu 1990:112). Conversely, when a language (mother tongue or foreign, acquired through upbringing or learnt through schooling) gains legitimacy and arbitrary truth in a given linguistic field, it gains symbolic power and functions as symbolic capital and legitimate linguistic capital. In other words, ‘capital should be understood in terms of its practical consequences, not objectified as a static product of the system’ (Grenfell,
et al. 1998:22). Therefore, English is linguistic capital in the context of China because it has consequences – it can be converted to other forms of capital (economic and symbolic) – ‘it “buys” prestige, power and consequent economic positioning’ (ibid.).

3 The Data Set

Two sets of data are used for analysis of the socially constructed ideas of English in China. The first set of data is obtained through an investigation of various types of documents, including 1) published official sources of historical documents (e.g. collections of documents on educational policies in book format); 2) published academic literature on English language education in China, including books, journals, and newsletters; 3) mass media, such as newspapers and magazines. The second set of data is obtained through cross-generational interviews with 67 people, among whom 11 were born before 1949, 43 were born between 1950 and 1978, 13 were born after 1978.

By analysing the two sets of data, this paper sketches out the macro-level arena where Chinese people’s conceptualisations of English proficiency evolve over time. This is to be achieved through chartering the evolution of government policy towards the English language within the state school system and demonstrating the changing status of English and English language education since the late nineteenth century, with particular focus on the post-1949 era. In documenting this period of educational, political and social change, this paper delineates the evolving official and popular attitudes toward the teaching and learning of the English language in China.

4 From Barbarian Language to Second Language

The roles assigned to the English language within China have a long and complicated history. From the outset, the reception of the English language was influenced by a
range of cultural and political concerns (cf. Bolton, preface to Adamson 2004; Bolton and Tong 2002; Ross 1992; 1993). Throughout many of the years, the guiding principle for state education was zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong (that of ‘Chinese learning as the foundation; Western learning for practice). Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), similar concerns have continued to influence the attitude of the government and educational policy-makers towards the English language whose decisions on language planning have, in turn, shaped the conceptualisations of the English language by the general public.

4.1 Beginning of English language education in the late Nineteenth Century

The controversy surrounding English and the teaching of English in China dates back to the late nineteenth century in Qing dynasty, when the Western countries sought trading access to Chinese markets and Christian missionary access to Chinese souls. The Chinese government at that time, however, ‘has endeavored, …, to restrict the intercommunication of natives and foreigners as much as is consistent with its existence; and as one means of accomplishing this object, it has prevented foreigners from learning the Chinese language. … English is almost ‘the only medium of conversation between foreigners and Chinese’ 2. English was then referred to by the Chinese government and ordinary people as ‘barbarian language’ or ‘devilish language of the red-bristled people’ 3.

The first Chinese to learn and use English in China was the compradores, who were employed by the Thirteen Hongs 4 as interpreters to do business with foreigners. The

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2 Author name not indicated, 'Jargon Spoken at Canton', Chinese Repository, Vol. IV (1836): 429. See section 4.3.1 on page for descriptions of the journal Chinese Repository.


4 Chinese: 十三行 (Shísānháng) was an area of Canton (Guangzhou), China where the first foreign trade was allowed in the 18th century since hai jin (海禁, literally ‘ocean forbidden’, a ban on maritime activities during China’s Ming Dynasty and again during the Qing Dynasty. It is commonly referred to as ‘Sea Ban’. Intended to curb piracy, the ban proved ineffective for that purpose, while imposing huge hardships on coastal communities and legitimate sea traders). It is also referred to as the ‘Thirteen
Compradores were often detested by their compatriots because of their contact with foreigner. They were referred to as ‘frivolous rascals and loafers … despised in their villages and communities’, who served as ‘linguists … familiar with barbarian affairs’ ‘only because they have no other means of making a livelihood’. Apparently, English was then linguistic capital only to a handful of people who had to rely on it for a living. Moreover, due to the low status of English in both official and popular opinions, the compradores did not intend to truly acquire the English language, but stopped when they perceived that their competence in spoken English had been adequate for them to engage in their own trade. English proficiency was thus conceptualised as the minimal linguistic repertoire required to do business with the ‘red-bristled people’.

Formal state English education began at the establishment of Tongwen Guan in 1862, after the Opium Wars revealed the technological superiority of the Western world, and China’s ‘inability to protect its territory integrity, with all the implications that this had for the nation’s cultural and political well-being’ (Adamson 2004:24-25). Seeing the threat from the Westerners, some prominent officials and scholars recognised that it was of urgent need to study Western ideas and languages in order to gain access to the Western world. English was then perceived to be a medium of communication between China and the Western world. However, in the late nineteenth century, with an over-two-thousand-year history of Confucian education, anyone who studied other languages than Chinese was viewed to be ‘going astray by speaking incomprehensible and inelegant languages’. Tongwen Guan, which fostered proficiency in barbarian
languages, thus suffered from great stigma.

In addition to *Tongwen Guan* in Beijing run by the central government, some provincial and local officials in favour of self-strengthening also established local foreign language schools. Foreign-style academies imparting specialised knowledge were established too. In all these school, English was an important subject, viewed as a bridge to Western learning. English, as well as other European languages, ceased to be called ‘barbarian languages’ (*yiwen*) in the new schools but referred to as ‘foreign’ (*yangwen, waiwen*) or ‘Western’ (*xiwen*) languages. The practice of the new schools gradually brought about changes to the conceptualisations of foreign languages and foreign countries.

As noted by Adamson (2004), in the late Qing Dynasty, it was the economic rather than spiritual benefits of learning English that attracted most learners: the study of the language offered access to lucrative posts with foreign companies, in the customs service, or the telegraph service. Nonetheless, in spite of the economic profits English language as linguistic capital could accumulate and its indispensability in diplomacy, the status of the language was ironically low in both official and popular opinions, and the learning and use of it carried negative symbolic allusions. Familiarisation with the English language and science ‘did not guarantee success in imperial examinations and the subsequent procurement of state office’ (Ross 1993), which was the most important means of social mobility in ancient China. Opposition against any form of interaction with foreigners spread all over China. The Boxer Uprising⁷ (*Yihetuan Qiyi*)

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⁷ Boxer Uprising was a violent anti-foreign, anti-Christian movement by the "Righteous Fists of Harmony," *Yihe tuan* or Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists in China (known as “Boxers” in English), between 1898 and 1901. (Definition from Wikipedia, available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boxer_Uprising)
in 1900 was one of the most well-know and the last attempt made by the conservatives in the imperial government to use the people to control the ‘barbarians’. The failure of the war led to loss of courage of the imperial government to confront the foreigners. From this time on, the Western Powers were more often than before called ‘the Powers’ (Liejiang) instead of ‘barbarians’, in recognition of their superiority (Liao 1984). The English language, in turn, started to be called ‘foreign language’ (yangwen⁸) not only in the new schools, but also by the public. This change of the term had significant implication: the English language, which used to connote barbarian and backwardness, now started to be symbolic of power and superiority.

In 1898, the well-known Hundred Day’s Reform⁹ took place with the objective to modernise China. Though short-lived, the Reform edicts decreed the establishment of a new three-tiered school system. English was among the subjects included in the mainstream curricula of secondary schools and higher education as well. Selection in the new education system was based on a new examination system, in which English was stipulated as a necessary component. This regulation legitimised English proficiency as a selection criterion in the state education system and foreran a tradition still alive today that conceptualises English proficiency as scholastic capital in terms of a qualification acquired through education system and leading to social mobility in contrast to linguistic capital enacted in real-life communications.

*English language education during the Republic (1912-1949)*

The Republic (1912 to 1949) saw changes to official conceptualisations of English proficiency. While conceptualisation of English as a practical tool was only alluded to

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⁸ 洋文 in Chinese characters. The first character yang has a connotation of ‘modern and superior’, which is in opposition to *tu*, which suggests local and thus backward and tasteless.

⁹ The Hundred Days’ Reform (Chinese: 百日维新 bairi weixin) was a failed 104-day national cultural, political and educational reform movement from 11 June to 21 September 1898, undertaken by the young Guangxu Emperor and his reform-minded supporters led by Kang Youwei. The movement proved to be short-lived, ending in a coup d'état (戊戌政変 "The Coup of 1898") by powerful conservative opponents led by Empress Dowager Cixi. (Definition from Wikipedia, available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hundred_Days%27_Reform)
in the Imperial Qing period\textsuperscript{10}, in the Republic era, English had been officially defined as 'a tool for gaining access to specialised subject knowledge'\textsuperscript{11}. Instead of restricting English proficiency to translation, the Republican curriculum began to frame learning objectives in terms of practical use and individuals' cognitive development: ‘The objective is to understand modern foreign languages, possess practical abilities, and improve intelligence’\textsuperscript{12}.

The subtle and intimate relationship between English language proficiency and social mobility generated by a national examinations system dawned during the Republic era. In 1932, the Ministry of Education launched the national graduation examinations for all junior and senior secondary school graduates, the results of which were directly related to mobility to higher-level education. English was a required subject in the examinations for both the junior and the senior\textsuperscript{13}. As a consequence, among both educational authorities and the ordinary people, English learning was perceived to be associated to educational mobility:

> English used to be a tool for studying foreign learning. If not for in-depth study, the practical usage of English was very slight for ordinary people. ... According to the Regulations of Secondary Schools, (as a required) subject in secondary schools, students invest all their efforts in English for sake of moving to upper-level education institutions, at the cost of neglecting other subjects. \textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{10} In the 1903 Zou-Ding School Constitution, the objective of English learning was suggested as ‘to use it for practical purposes and to expand knowledge (使得临事应用，增进知识).


\textsuperscript{13} Ministry of Education, ‘Regulations of Secondary School Graduation Examinations (Revised) 修正中学学生毕业会考规程’, 1935.

\textsuperscript{14} Han, M. ‘Proposal to Reduce English Language Teaching Hours in Junior Secondary Schools 减少初级中学教学时数案’, \textit{The Third National Education Conference Organised by Ministry of Education 教育部第三次全国教育会议}, 1939. Cited in Li Liangyou, Zhang Rishen, and Liu Li, \textit{History of English Language Teaching in China 中国英语教学史}, (Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language
As outlined above, in the Republic era, conceptualisation of English as a school subject had been established and the objectives of learning English at secondary schools were perceived to be passing examinations to gain access to higher-level institutions. The value of English as linguistic capital was seen to be minimal by ordinary people who did not have the opportunity for pursuing further education. In other words, such ideas had been established in the Republican era that English proficiency was scholastic capital valuable in the education market to the extent that it could be mobilised in examinations in exchange of better educational and life chances.\textsuperscript{15}

Popularity of English learning was also heightened by the growth of exposure to the Western world through international mass media and mass entertainment (Adamson 2004). Hostile dispositions towards the Westerners held by ordinary Chinese people in the past were replaced by admirations for foreign (yang, meaning modern and superior) things. Recalling English language teaching before the establishment of PRC, Zhang Zhigong wrote:

> During the period from ‘abolishing traditional examinations and promoting new schools’ at late Qing dynasty through the reactionary rule of the Nationalist Party, many young people went at learning English with a will, because they perceived the ‘profit’ of knowing a foreign language – speaking a little foreign language enabled them to squeeze into the ‘upper class Chinese’, and made it easier for them to crawl upward, at least to make a living.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} This idea had origin in the last years of the Qing Empire after the issuance of \textit{On Selection of Foreign Language and Curriculum Change} in 1910. See p. 11 for details and for the explanation of how I use the terms ‘scholastic capital’ and ‘linguistic capital’ in this thesis.

\textsuperscript{16} Zhang, Z. ‘The Significance and Objectives of Foreign Language Teaching at Secondary Schools 中学外语教学的意义和目的要求’, \textit{Foreign Language Teaching and Research 外语教学与研究} 1963(4). Professor Zhang is a famous linguist and educator in China.
This quote bears strong ideological taste of the years when it was published in China, attempting to criticise the polluted objectives of language learning; however, looking beyond the ideological prejudice, it can be discerned that during the Republic era, proficiency in English was perceived to offer social and economic mobility as a mark of education, to the outrage of some members of the aristocracy; even for those lower down the social scale, a smattering of English presented a passport to employment, albeit in humble positions (cf. Borthwick 1983).

4.2 A Narrow Survival, 1949-1956

The People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949. Foreign assistance to the newly founded PRC on economic development through importation of science and technology was solicited exclusively from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) due to the tension between China and the capitalist Western world. Consequently, the first attempt to ‘make foreign things serve China’ (yang wei zhong yong17) highlighted the importance of the Russian language and diminished English language teaching in China. The 1950 secondary school syllabus manifested the preference of Russian to English: ‘If resources (e.g. teachers and textbooks) allow, Russian should be offered’18.

In addition to the explicit preference of Russian in the curriculum, public opinion (yulun) formed by political propaganda through newspapers, magazines, and government decrees regarding operations in other fields also led to an apathetic and even hostile popular opinion (sulun) on English. A tide of anti-imperialist, especially anti-US sentiment swept China with the effect that it ‘became somehow unpatriotic to

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17 洋为中用, put forward by Chairman Mao Zedong in 1956 in ‘A Talk with Musicians’. It is an important part of Mao’s theory, summarising the history of China’s ever-lasting efforts to strike a balance between assimilating foreign learning and maintain the Chinese tradition in an attempt to achieve modernisation in China. elucidates that Marxism is strong ideological arms in the actualisation of Chinese modernisation, advocates that we should convert it to Chinese, and emphasises that we should learn in the way of criticism and analysis.

study the language of our enemies’ (Tang 1983:41).

While the English language had been connoted to modernity and superiority till the end of the Republic era, in the early years of PRC it was suddenly pushed to the opposite extreme of backwardness and decadency due to the overwhelming anti-imperialism ideology. The value of English as scholastic and linguistic capital subsided too. The significance of English as access to Western learning diminished because of China’s exclusive reliance on the USSR for technological know-how. Moreover, as a result of the US-imposed economic blockade and China’s isolation from the West, commercial and political intercourses with English-speaking countries underwent drastic decrease, leading to impossibility of contact with English-speakers by ordinary Chinese people. Consequently, people did not see the benefit of learning English, since it did not provide social, educational or economic mobility. On the contrary, English-knowing might even mean suffering due to its association with imperialism.

4.3 Revival of English Language Education 1956-1966

Although Russian had been preferred, ‘the government did not completely lose sight of the practical value of the English language as a means of access to science and technology’ (Adamson 2004:36). In January 1956, Premier Zhou Enlai called for a ‘march toward modern science, improving rapidly the scientific and cultural standard of China’\(^ {19} \), in which a necessary condition was to ‘scale up the teaching and learning of foreign languages and to expand the translation of foreign books’\(^ {20} \). In April, Chairman Mao made his important speech of ‘On the Ten Major Relationships’,


which approved the ‘learning of advanced science and technology as well as scientific managerial techniques in capitalist countries’, summarised as a popular slogan ‘making foreign things serve China’. In addition, the development of China’s foreign policy, largely through the diplomacy of Premier Zhou Enlai, led to increased international exchanges and entailed use of foreign languages other than Russian (cf. Wilson 1984).

In July 1956, the Ministry of Education announced the *Circular Concerning the Subject of Foreign Language at Secondary Schools*, which stipulated that the ratio of schools offering Russian to those offering English should be 1:1. The circular was a response to the newly defined priority for the CCP government to develop the productive forces and carry out large-scale economic construction, which signified a shift from political and ideological concerns to economic concerns. It marked the revival of English language teaching in China from a period during which the English language suffered severe ideological bias. In 1959, foreign language was further designated by the Ministry of Education as one of the five major subjects in secondary schools, and the ratio of schools offering English increased to two-thirds. From 1962, English became a required subject in the College Entrance Examinations. These regulations confirmed a positive official status of English in the education field.

The focus of English language education during this period was on how it could help socialist economic and cultural construction. Foreign languages were officially formulated in the 1963 *Russian/English Language Teaching Syllabus for Full-Time Secondary Schools (Draft)* as

> an important tool for learning general and scientific knowledge, making contacts with

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other countries, promoting cultural exchanges and understandings between peoples in various countries.  

Apparently, this formulation of English as a tool was a conception descending down from late Qing times, which stemmed from the macro-level needs of the nation and viewed English as access to Western scientific knowledge as well as vehicle of diplomacy. The objectives of foreign language teaching in tertiary degree courses as defined by Vice Premier Chen Yi, however, represented a direct response to the need of economic construction and diplomatic development:

Our objective is to cultivate a number of foreign language talents with a firm political stand, who can speak good English, Russian, French, Spain, Arabian, or other languages, and can write, speak, translate, and make use of foreign languages to conduct scientific research…  

In sharp contrast to the contemptuous title of ‘compradores’ in the late Qing Dynasty, the use of the term ‘foreign language talents’ and the leading position of English in the list of languages explicate the conceptualisation that people with English proficiency had by then been regarded as capable and valuable, suggesting that English was no longer viewed as symbolic of imperialism. Instead, in a time when economic development became the major task of the government, the value of the English language as linguistic capital bringing about productive forces through the access it served to open to scientific and technology of the Western world outweighed...

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23 Premier Chen made a speech titled 'On Teaching Principles in Foreign Language Colleges 关于外国语院校的教学方针问题' in Oct. 22, 1964, which was published as an official document numbered (65 高厅秘赵字 263) and delivered to all tertiary institutes.

24 Translated from Chinese: 外语人才 (The first two Chinese characters mean ‘foreign language’, the last two ‘educated and capable professional; asset’. The world ‘talent’ is adopted in the text because it is the word commonly used as the English equivalent for 人才 (ren cai) in China.)
its ideological implication.

Changes of the official attitude toward English and the rising status of English in the economic, diplomatic, as well as in the educational fields were echoed in popular opinions of English proficiency. In an article published in 1962, Ma Junming noticed that there was renewed interest in English and favourable atmosphere for learning English among students. He, a retired teacher of English, recalled:

From the 1960s, with the acrimonious Sino-Soviet schism, popularity of Russian in the society greatly decreased, while the number of people who wished to learn English increased. What’s more, with the improvement of diplomatic relationship with the European countries and the development of science and technology, the government realised the importance of English language education. … Contrary to the negligence of English teaching in the 1950s, there seemed to be an over-emphasis on English.

Manifest in the above quotes was a correlation of the popular opinion to the state policy and official discourse. Such a correlation was also evidenced by the widely-held assumption that people engaged in diplomacy, international trade, and international cultural exchanges should be proficient in foreign languages and that people who were not in these professions but would enter colleges to learn science and technology or various expertises needed to use the tool of foreign language. The assumption, in turn, signifies a conceptualisation of English proficiency as expertise

25 Ma, J. 1962 'Basic Knowledge and Basic Training of Foreign Languages', People's Education 人民教育 1962(10).
26 Interview data collected on March 22, 2007 with He, a retired secondary school teacher of English at the age of 68.
27 For example, see discourses in Nao, Y., 'On the Significance of Learning Chinese, Mathematics, and Foreign Languages in Secondary Schools 漫谈学好中学语文、数学、外语的重要性', People's Education 人民教育 1963(9); Zhang, Z., 'The Significance and Objectives of Foreign Language Teaching at Secondary Schools 中学外语教学的意义和目的要求', Foreign Language Teaching and Research 外语教学与研究 1963(4); Zhang, G., 'The Objectives and Requirement as Reflected by the New Secondary School Foreign Language Textbooks 新编中学外语课本所体现的教学目的和具体要求', People's Education 人民教育 1963(4).
of a few professionals, alien to the life of the general public, as demonstrated by the doubts of many people about learning English at secondary schools:

Not every secondary school student will continue on to higher education. Those who do not will hardly use foreign languages in their work. Then why it is required that every school student should spend a lot of time and energy in learning foreign languages? 28

It can be discerned that due to lack of contact by ordinary people with the world outside of China, the value of English as linguistic capital, although legitimised by the government, was limited to a few scholastic and professional fields. For the ordinary people who were not engaged in those fields, English was just a foreign language, required as a subject in the school curricular:

When I was at school in the 1960s, English just meant a subject to me. After I entered college, since I studied History, English had nothing to do with me, so I forgot all about English. 29

It is true that English was hardly used in our daily life at that time, but still many of us attached weight to studying English. After all, English was required to enter universities before the Cultural Revolution. 30

The above quotes, though illustrative of the irrelevance of English as linguistic capital to the non-professionals, shows a resumption of English as scholastic capital in the education field as a result of its regained legitimacy in the national curriculum and its relevance, through its presence in the national college entrance examinations, to educational mobility, which was closely linked to social and economic mobility

29 Interview data collected on May 27, 2007 with Chen, a retired college teacher at the age of 65.
30 Interview data collected on June 29, 2008 with Li, an engineer at the age of 62.
during the two decades after the establishment of PRC.31

5.4 The Cultural Revolution 1966-1976

The heyday of English in China was brief. In 1966, the CCP Central Committee issued the May 16 Circular, marking the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, a time when knowledge was regarded as evil, and intellectuals were named the ‘stinking ninth’32. The foreign language education field suffered even more as it was charged with ‘worshiping foreign things and fawning on foreign countries (chong yang wei wai)’ and ‘having illicit relations with a foreign country (li tong wai guo)’. Foreign language educators, from administrators, experts, to ordinary teaching practitioners, were vulnerable to be accused of being ‘spies of the imperialist and revisionist countries’. English Language teachers were major targets because of ‘the connotations of capitalism, privilege and other forms of political undesirability associated with English’ (Adamson 2004:108).

In such a political climate, it was quite natural that people were reluctant to teach or learn English. Some English Language teachers recalled that parents were annoyed by their children learning English and requested that English cease to be taught to their children, and that students were told by their parents that English was useless.33

31 For reference, see ‘Overcome the Idea of ‘Further Education is the Only Way to Pursue’ 克服“升学唯一”思想’, People’s Education 人民教育 1963(12), and Liu, S. ‘Does Failure to Enter a Higher School Mean No Prospect 不升学就没有前途吗’, People’s Education 人民教育 1953(8) for critiques on the correlation of educational mobility (through examination-taking) to social and economic mobility popular in the general public.

32 Translated from 臭老九. In the Cultural Revolution, people were categorised into the ‘Five Red Classes’ and ‘Nine Black Classes’. Intellectuals ranked ninth in the ‘Nine Black Classes’. People in the ‘Nine Black Classes’ were targets of revolution.

33 For example, see English Teaching Team at Beijing Jingshan School, ‘Improving Primary and Secondary School Students’ Proficiency in Foreign Languages 努力提高中小学生的外语水平’, Foreign Languages in Schools 中小学外语教学 1978(2); Zhang, L. 1978 ‘How Did Class 2(1) Come to Like Foreign Language Lessons? 二(1)班是怎样爱上外语课的?’, Foreign Languages in Schools 中小学外语教学 1978(1).
Resistance to learning English was understandable: There were no inherent benefits – proficiency in English would not lead to improved career or study prospects. English proficiency lost its value as either linguistic or scholastic capital; instead, it was avoided like plague as it might incur criticism, vilification, and even persecution because of the association of English with capitalism and counter-revolution.

5.5 Recovery and Development for Modernisation 1977-1993

The demise of the Cultural Revolution in October 1977 marked the end of a period of political and ideological turbulence for China. Once again, the central task of Chinese government fell on economic construction. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping instigated a series of economic reforms, known as the ‘market socialist’ reforms. He designed the Open Door Policy to encourage foreign investment in China and thus facilitate the transfer of technological expertise. It marked the beginning of a process of profound social transformation at all levels, social, economic and cultural (Zhou and Tong 2002) and was a significant boost to both the status and role of English in China. From then on, official attitude towards foreign things has been positive; English Language ceased to be simplistically associated with imperialism or capitalism.

The Ministry of Education issued Guidelines on Improving Foreign Language Education in March 1979, which represented a turning point in the history of foreign language education in China. Soon after, English was re-designated as one of the three major subjects at secondary school and reappeared in National College Entrance Examinations.

Consistent with all previous stages when English was viewed as access to Western knowledge, translation/interpretation was targeted as a major objective in English language education when economic construction toward Four Modernisations began.

The 1978 Four-Year Teaching Plan for English Majors at Higher Education stated: ‘The objective is to train English translators/interpreters, teachers and others English
language professionals".

This conceptualisation of English proficiency as translating/interpreting abilities derived from the continued recognition of the value of English as linguistic capital at a time when contacts with the Western world were made almost exclusively by a few people engaged in professions which required such contacts, mediated by translators and interpreters. However, dealings with English speakers soon expanded to an unprecedented scale as a result of the rapid economic development. It was soon realised that many industries, other than those traditionally viewed as dealing with foreign affairs, required direct contacts with English speakers too. Consequently, English proficiency started to be perceived as in association with expertise in other industries. The objectives of English language education, thus, started to target communicative competence in specific professions. This change in objectives of foreign language education constituted a shifting conceptualisation of English proficiency from skills of translators/interpreters to a personal tool for communication, which represented a prelude to the popularisation of English at the turn of the century.

The Open Door Policy increased ordinary Chinese people’s dealings with English speakers and created well-paid jobs for people proficient in English with the development of international trade and the tourist industry. English proficiency, which used to be evidence of collaboration with enemies in the Cultural Revolution and was thus avoided or kept secret, regained a positive cultural and political image. Once again, it was desired for by many people as linguistic and scholastic capital:

There was a popular enthusiasm for learning English at that time (the 1980s), because the government allowed individuals to study abroad. It was a popular desire for ‘the free world’ at that time. Many of my friends were determined to go abroad. They went mad in learning English. Some of them came back in the early 1990s and set up successful

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business. At that time, the returnees were much admired as being ‘gold plated’.  

After the resumption of National College Entrance Examinations in 1978, students’ interest in learning English was greatly enhanced. Furthermore, after the reform and opening-up, it was easy for English-knowing persons to find well-paid jobs. A popular slogan at that time went as ‘spring for science’. We made a joke and said, ‘if things go on like this, there will be a summer for English’.  

The above quotes reveal reasons for the popular enthusiasm for learning English as associated with better life chances. Compared with the previous stages when the linguistic and scholastic capital value of English proficiency at the micro level (i.e. in relation to individual needs of the general public) was restricted to educational mobility for those wishing to move up educational ladder or skills of a few people who took translation/interpretation as their career, by the early 1990s, the value of English proficiency as perceived by the general public had greatly increased in terms of the access it provided to enhanced educational and career prospects in terms of a wide range of options, which translates into enhanced economic and social status. The fact that proficiency in English readily qualified people for well-paid jobs and the admiration for ‘gold-plated’ returnees implied that English proficiency had suggested distinction. In other words, English had accrued a value of symbolic capital and had begun to serve as an indicator for stratification of people.  

5.6 Popularisation of English from 1993 onward  

Official attitude toward English  

Further development of economic reforms since the Open Door Policy in 1978

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35 Interview data collected on August 8, 2007 with Fan, a businessman at the age of 42.  
36 Interview data collected on Nov. 16, 2006 with Wen, a teacher of English at the age of 50.
continued unabated\(^{37}\), ensuring that the correspondent trends towards pedagogical developments in the English Language curriculum that stressed communicative competence remained in place (cf. Adamson 2004). The conceptualisation of English proficiency as a personal communicative tool for people in various walks of life continued to develop towards popularisation of English in China. Accordingly, the 1993 and 2000 Curricula addressed the recent social and economic change and represented an official attitude toward popularising English in China:

To meet the needs of our Open Door Policy and to speed up Socialist modernisation, efforts should be made to enable *as many people as possible* to acquire certain command of foreign languages. \(^{38}\)

Learning and acquiring a foreign language has become *a basic requirement for every citizen* in the 21\(^{st}\) century. \(^{39}\)

In September 2001, English was introduced as a compulsory subject from Grade 3 in elementary schools. Duration of English learning in formal education for Chinese people has extended to 11 years at least, as English has become a compulsory subject at all levels of formal education from elementary school to graduate study.

Popularisation of English in formal education has been achieved not only through extending duration of English learning at school, but also through promoting English as the medium of instruction. In 2001, Ministry of Education highlighted the importance of English in the education field by viewing teaching through the medium


of English as one of the twelve measures to improve quality of Education at tertiary level:

For the purpose of ‘gearing education to the needs of modernisation, the world and the future’ to meet the challenge of economic globalisation and scientific and technological innovation, college education should promote using foreign languages such as English to teach general and specialised courses. 40

Subsequently, the term ‘bilingual teaching’ took no time to become one of the most popular words throughout China in journals and newspapers as well as ordinary people’s discourse 41. In addition to bilingual programmes at the tertiary level, elementary and secondary bilingual schools and bilingual kindergartens mushroomed as many schools rebranded themselves and many new schools chose to be labelled as ‘bilingual’. The proliferation of bilingual programmes implies that English-mediated teaching has been accepted as a symbol of quality and a feature of distinction, as proclaimed by a boy in a bilingual primary school: ‘bilingual schools are more deluxe than ordinary schools’ 42. The adoption of the term ‘bilingual’, which places the English language in parallel with the mother tongue Chinese, also indicates a tendency to conceptualise English not as a foreign language, but as a second language.

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41 There are two types of bilingual education in China. One aims at providing education to ethnic minorities by using both the minority languages and the Standardised Chinese (Putonghua in Chinese, sometimes Mandarin in western literature). It has a relatively long history since the establishment of the PPC, but it remains peripheral and little is known about it. The other type involves the teaching of English in China with the development of bilingual teaching programmes where English is adopted as the medium of instruction after 2000. A survey of the online database of Chinese academic journals with the keywords ‘bilingual teaching (双语教学)’ shows a sudden turn in the use of this term. Before 2001, articles on ‘bilingual teaching’ predominantly concern the first type of bilingual teaching, i.e. minority languages and Chinese, while after 2000, articles on ‘bilingual teaching’ predominantly concern English-Chinese bilingual education.

42 My translation from ‘有双语特色的学校比一般的学校要高档’. The boy was around 11 (Grade 5 of elementary school) when he made this remark which appeared in an article titled ‘Bilingual Teaching: When to Start’ in the February 28th issue of Chengdu Commercial, one of the biggest local newspapers in Chengdu, Sichuan.
The tendency towards viewing English as a second language rather than a foreign language is further illuminated by the re-conceptualisation of English as the ‘basic requirement for every citizen’. English proficiency alone ceased to qualify adequately as talent. In the 1998 *Views on Undergraduate Foreign Languages (as Majors) Education Reform to Meet the Needs of the 21st Century* issued by Ministry of Education, it is claimed that:

Due to the diversified needs of foreign language talents, the education model in the past which trained talents with foreign language proficiency only with a few basic skills does not meet the needs of the market economy. The need in the market is diminishing for graduates from courses dealing with just language and literature. Therefore, foreign language (as majors) education must shift from academic training model for language proficiency only to a model training wide-aperture, practical, and composite talents.  

Such a view resulted in the replacement of the term ‘foreign language talents (*wai yu ren cai*)’, which referred to people proficient in a foreign language (especially English), by ‘bilingual talents (*shuang yu ren cai*)’ and ‘composite talents (*fu he xing ren cai*)’, which refer to those people who are competent not only in the English language, but also in other specialised areas. English proficiency, as a ‘basic requirement for every citizen’, has been conceptualised as a necessity in everyone’s life and thus the English language ceased to be viewed as something foreign and alien, but a necessary qualification, a second language to be used by everyone as a vehicle for international communication.

The popularisation of English is accompanied by an unprecedented emphasis on communicative competence in English. Both the 2000 Curriculum for junior secondary schools and the 2001 Curriculum for senior secondary schools articulated

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fostering students’ capabilities to use English for real-life communications. While English proficiency used to be preferred as reading and translation abilities of a small professional population mainly for academic or diplomatic purposes, it has now been desired for as listening and speaking abilities of a large number of ordinary people.

*Marketisation and Industrialisation of English Language Education*

Economic reforms starting in 1978 generated a flourishing market economy, which has exerted great influence on China’s educational development. To create more learning opportunities for citizens, the post-Mao leadership of the CCP adopted the principle of marketisation (*shi chang hua*), a policy of ‘gradual decentralisation that breaks the state’s monopoly over education, producing an irreversible trend toward diversity and plurality’ (Mok 1997), leading to the marketisation and industrialisation of education in China.

As noted by Kwong (1997), from the early 1990s, the number of private schools increased rapidly. These private schools provide economic benefits for the owners and they market themselves by selling marketable skills. English proficiency is one of these skills with its growing importance in both the education field and labour market after the issuance of the Open Door Policy. Thus, it is understandable that many elitist private schools employ intensive English training as their distinctive feature. Many other elitist private schools are labelled as ‘Foreign Languages School’ (e.g. the secondary school in my case studies).

These elitist private schools have ‘state-of-the-art’ facilities and employ teachers with high academic qualifications, or even renowned specialists. They are, of course,

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45 For reference, see Wu, W. and Luo, D., 'Heavy Laden Wings: Sad Contemplations on China's
high-priced and sometimes referred to as ‘schools for the aristocratic (gui zu xue xiao)’. The general practice of highlighted existence of English in these schools generates an association of English proficiency with aristocracy, and in effect helps to maintain an ‘English élitist’ ideology in China\(^{46}\).

In addition to the high-priced academic-oriented private schools, institutions aiming at short-term English training flourished in China too, creating an English training industry which produces one percent of China’s GDP\(^{47}\). It is reported that by 2007 there have been over 50,000 English language training institutions in China with a market capitalisation of over 150 billions Yuan\(^{48}\).

The English training industry is developed due to the growing demands of the population to learn English for various reasons, yet at the same time, it plays its part in shaping people’s ideas of the English language. To attract customers, English training institutions bombard people with various types of advertisements. Consequently, people in China are constantly exposed to the advertisement discourses, which emphasise and exaggerate the significance of English proficiency, depicting it as a passport to success. An example of such discourses quoted in a chat about rationales for learning English by Lulu, a secondary school girl, goes: ‘English changes your life’.

Suggested by such a discourse is a conceptualisation of English proficiency as omnipotent, as if English proficiency alone would produce a life as people desire it. These discourses, purposefully designed to draw attention of target customers, have to some extent fermented the belief of English-as-necessity in the audience, as expressed by Lulu:

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\(^{46}\) See page 23 in section 6.3 ‘English as Distinction for a more detailed discussion on private foreign language schools and the English elitist ideology in China.


It’s a bit exaggerated to say that English can change the life of a person. But just like many people say, ‘English is not omnipotent, but you are impotent without English’.

The saying quoted by Lulu is an adaptation from a very popular proverb originating from the 1980s when people started to feel a growing gap between the wealthy and the less affluent: ‘Money is not omnipotent, but you are impotent without money’. It was born when the developing market economy made people realise that the possession of money enabled them to achieve a desired lifestyle while the lack of it meant deprivation. The appropriation of this saying by Lulu indicated that English has been conceptualised as necessary and empowering. In other words, it implied that English is not alien, but intertwined with life of ordinary people. It is, as Lulu assumed, ‘my second language’.

**Popular Opinions of English Proficiency**

The popular enthusiasm for learning English continues to grow to an extent that ‘the whole populace of China learns English’.

It has been a common belief that people should start learning English as early as possible since it is so important. Such a belief is based on the conceptualisation of English as necessary in life. It has been so taken-for-granted by so many people that a clip of a TV documentary goes:

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49 Lulu made this statement in a chat with me in July 2008, one year after the main part of my fieldwork ended. At that time she had received results of her entrance examinations to the senior secondary school. She failed to qualify progress, on a reduced-fee basis, to the senior department of the private elitist school she attended, and had to go to a public school as her family was in difficulty to afford another three years in the private school. She expressed her worries about being less proficient in English as English was just a ‘normal’ subject in that public school. When I asked why she had such worries, she said without thinking: ‘Because English is my second language. It will be required to do anything in the future (translated from 因为英语是我的第二语言嘛。以后不管是做什么都得用得上嘛).’

50 My translation from 全民学英语 (quan min xue ying yu), a popular saying in today’s China.

51 A conversation between two brothers at dinner in a peasant family in Lin County, Gansu Province, which is a poverty-stricken area in Northwest China. It is reported in the CCTV (Chinese Central Television) weekly documentary ‘Story’ on January 4, 2006, subtitled ‘A family by Huanghe River—Chinese people in the 21st century’. The jobs taken up by ‘peasant workers’ in China are usually labour work involving no use of English.
- Brother, I want to go to Guangzhou to take up a job.
- How could you? You can’t speak English, and you don’t know how to use computers.
- Do I have to speak English in order to find a job?
- Of course.

What has been implied by the ways people talk about English in the above examples is that learning and using English has become a habitualised way of life, something taken-for-granted as natural; in other words, an English-learning habitus has emerged throughout China. To use the term of an interviewee, English proficiency has now been viewed as ‘a basic survival skill’ in the Chinese society today, by wide ranges of people, young or old, well-educated or less-educated. In this sense, English is now conceptualised as a second language that one has to acquire in addition to his mother tongue. Such a belief derives from the fact that English proficiency constitutes indispensable capital required for upward mobility in a period of social transformation in China.

*The cons of popularisation of English in China*

Popularisation of English in China does not go without resistance. The cultural arbitrary of English in contemporary China provoked critiques in the academic field from various perspectives such as equality in education and employment, purity of the mother tongue and Chinese culture, linguistic imperialism, etc. Ordinary people voiced their resistance too, and their resistance predominantly lies in the arbitrary nature of English as a selection criterion. Complaints about how lack of English proficiency (in many cases in terms of English proficiency test certificates) deprived people of employment or career development opportunities can be noticed everywhere. In this sense, what people oppose is the over-emphasised value of English as scholastic/credential capital.
Some people are aware of a potential threat to Chinese culture by the spread of English in China; however, they constitute only a very small part of the population. Among the 67 people I interviewed, only one related popularisation of English in China to symbolic violence with regard to the historic role of English in China, while all of them were aware of the importance of English as scholastic and linguistic capital. On the one hand, this means a lack of awareness of the ideological implications of popularising English in China, yet on the other hand, it manifests that for the majority of the ordinary people, the major reason why they attach importance to the learning of English lies in the established fact that English has accrued high scholastic and linguistic capital value in contemporary China. In other words, pursuit of the practical value of English as scholastic and linguistic capital and the potential social and economic benefits of it outweighs the desire to be socialised into English culture.

5.7 Conclusion

English language education in China has from its genesis a century ago been inextricably intertwined with changes in the political-economic field. During the periods when ideological concerns prevailed, English was perceived as contaminant to the cultural and spiritual integrity of China; however, whenever economic concerns have prevailed and China has opened her door to foreign influence, the English language has been perceived as ‘a prerequisite for the smooth passage of technology and diplomacy’ (Ross 1993: 8). Nevertheless, it is revealed in the paper that the changing definitions of China’s development needs and her relationship with the Western world have led to changing status of the English language and changing conceptualisations of English from a barbarian language in the late Qing Dynasty to a second language in contemporary China.

Despite the existence of a long-standing concern on the cultural and ideological implication of English on Chinese society, a utilitarian orientation to the English
language can be noticed to predominate both official and popular attitudes towards English. At the macro level, the idea of ‘making foreign things serve China’ (yang wei zhong yong) has been a guideline in English language education from the very beginning, with ‘modernisation’, and nowadays ‘globalisation’ and ‘internationalisation’ as both direction and justification for learning English, which have become the ‘most powerful verbal weapon in an impressive arsenal of social, cultural, and economic reform rhetoric’ (Henze 1987) in contemporary China. At the micro level, ordinary people have always grounded their perceptions of the English language on the practical value of it as scholastic and linguistic capital, in other words, social mobility that English proficiency can bring about.


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