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# CHINA'S ENGLISH

A HISTORY OF ENGLISH  
IN CHINESE EDUCATION



BOB ADAMSON

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**Bob Adamson**



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## *Series editor's preface*

The English language has a long and fascinating history in China. The first English speakers arrived in southern China in the early seventeenth century, and by the late eighteenth century varieties of pidgin English were being spoken in Guangzhou (Canton) and Macau. From the outset, the reception of the English language was influenced by a range of cultural and political concerns which reflected the anxieties of Qing dynasty China to the 'strangers at the gate', whose mercantile and imperialist ambitions were perceived as a major threat to the Qing government and imperial Chinese society. Before the two Opium Wars (1839–42, 1856–60), the access to English within formal educational institutions was severely limited, and existed only in a small number of missionary schools. After 1860, access to English in the educational domain increased greatly, not only within Western Christian institutions whose numbers multiplied in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, but also in the first Chinese schools of foreign languages, including the Tongwen Guan (Interpreter's College) in Beijing (1861), Guang Fangyan Guan (School for Dispersing Languages) in Shanghai (1863) and the Jiangnan Arsenal (1867), also in Shanghai. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, knowledge of English was seen as essential to the modernizing efforts of 'self-strengtheners' and other reformers. Later, during the 1920s, the Nationalist government sought to regulate the teaching of English within a school system that served the aims of the government, and limited the influence of missionary institutions. Throughout many of these years, the guiding principle for state education was *zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong* (that of 'studying China for essence, studying the West for utility').

As this book demonstrates, similar cultural and political concerns have continued to influence the attitude of the government and educational policy-makers towards the English language since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. In this work, Dr Adamson has charted the evolution of government policy towards the English language within the state school system, and his research demonstrates the extent to which such policies

have varied, and the rapidly changing status of English and English language teaching during the post-1949 era. In 1957, there were only 843 secondary school teachers of English throughout the whole country, compared with some 400,000 teachers teaching an astonishing 50 million schoolchildren by the year 2002. However, whereas previous researchers have tended to characterize the recent history of English education in China in terms of abrupt oscillations between competing language policies determined by the politics of the day, Adamson argues that a close examination of the historical record suggests a somewhat more complex picture of evolutionary development. In documenting this period of educational, political and social change, Adamson draws upon his own experience as an educator and textbook advisor in China, as well as on a wealth of ethnographic and documentary evidence. This volume is of singular importance in providing a detailed record of education policies, curriculum development and English language teaching in China from the 1949 to the present day.

Kingsley Bolton  
Stockholm University  
January 2004

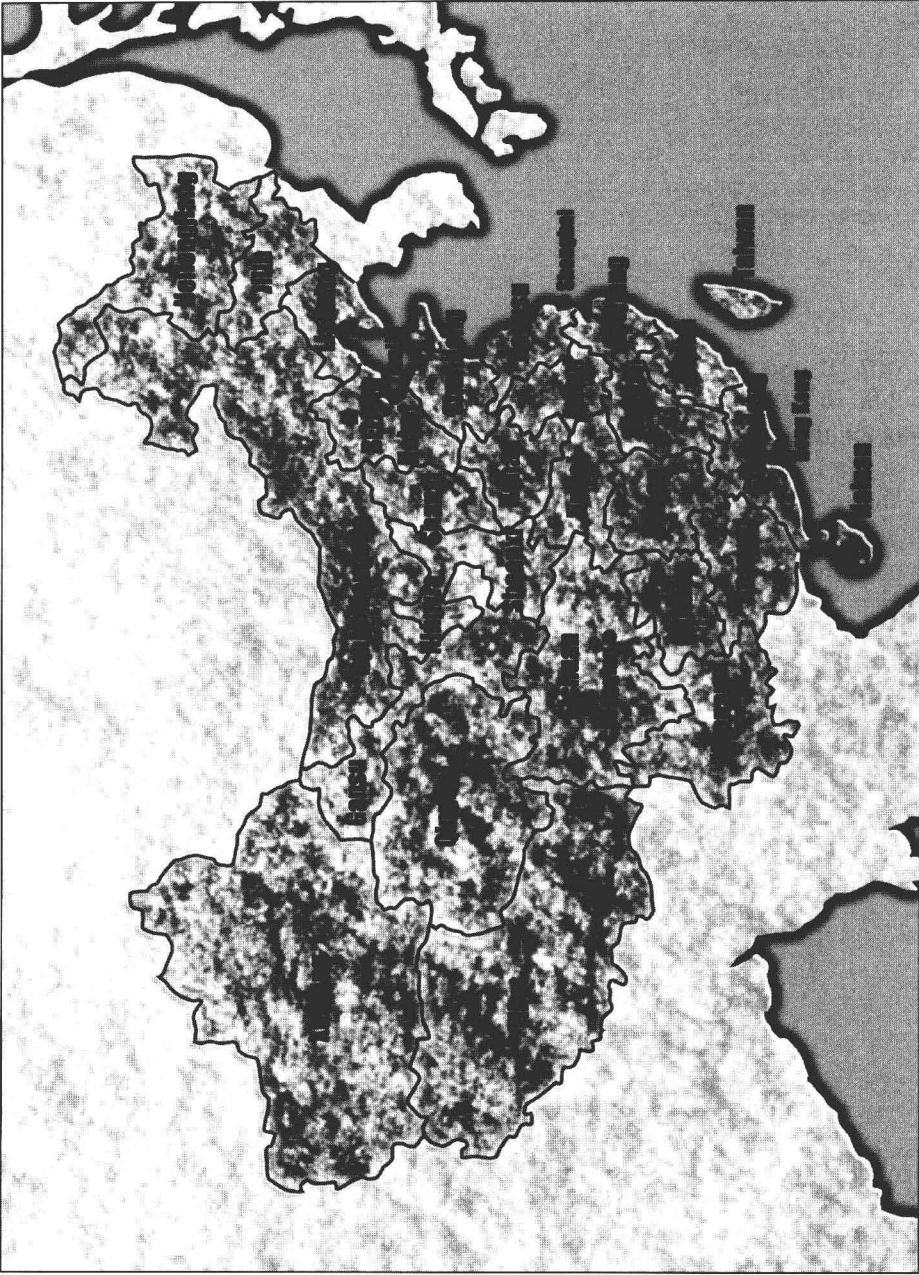
## *Acknowledgements*

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I am grateful to the various publishers for permission to reproduce material from my papers that had been published in their journals. Chapter 2 draws upon 'Barbarian as Foreign Language: English in China's Schools', *World Englishes* 21(2) (July 2002) published by Blackwell Publishing; parts of Chapter 7 appeared in 'English with Chinese Characteristics: China's New Curriculum', *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 21(2) (September 2001) published by the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University and Oxford University Press; and several chapters draw on data that appeared in 'Constructing an Official English for China, 1949–2000' (co-written with Ora Kwo), *Asia Pacific Journal of Communication* 12(1) (July 2002), published by John Benjamins Publishing Co.

## *Note on transliteration*

The official system of romanization for Chinese characters in the People's Republic of China is *hanyu pinyin*, which produces transliterations such as *Beijing* for the capital city, *Yan'an* for the communist base established at the end of the Long March and *Mao Zedong* for the name of the nation's leader after the revolution of 1949. This system was not uniformly adopted in English language textbooks until Series Eight, published in 1993. In earlier textbooks, other systems of romanization were used, giving forms such as *Peking*, *Yenan* and *Mao Tse-tung*. In this book, *hanyu pinyin* is used, except for authors who used another styling, for institutions that have maintained long-established English versions of their name (such as Peking University), for references to names in a textbook and in direct quotations.



Map of China





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## Point of departure

In 1983, I took up a teaching post in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Soon after my arrival, I was being shown around the city by one of my students, Mr Liu, and we chatted about his school days. They had been disrupted by the Cultural Revolution, a period of massive social and political upheaval, and at that time, Mr Liu told me, he had joined the local Red Guards, the juvenile revolutionaries, and participated in various activities. He took me to see his former secondary school, where he indicated a third-storey window in the teachers' dormitories. That, he said, was the window from which the Red Guards had pushed their English Language teacher to his death. 'Why?' I asked. Mr Liu shrugged, 'Because he taught English.' This was my first intimation of the historically controversial, even deadly, status of English in China.

This revelation was subsequently reinforced by colleagues in Taiyuan and educators from around the country, many of whom had suffered during the Cultural Revolution. One recalled how he was accused of being an imperialist spy, simply because of his competence in English. Another recalled hearing her neighbour being beaten to death by the Red Guards for refusing to burn his treasured stamp collection that included British and Australian stamps.

Several months after my tour with Mr Liu, I was crossing the college grounds after class when I met a little boy, aged about six, who lived in a neighbouring courtyard. He greeted me with a cheerful 'Hello!' and proceeded to chat for a while in Chinese. I was surprised when he suddenly asked, 'Are foreigners good people?' Not having the linguistic resources to cope with this question in detail, I replied, 'Most are good — and we're good friends, aren't we?' He paused for thought and then said, 'Yes ... but why did you start the Opium War?' This was another forceful reminder that China has had a troubled relationship with English speakers: at different times in history,

the language has been associated with military aggressors with technologically superior weapons, barbarians who ransacked imperial palaces, imperialists who seized chunks of Chinese sovereign territory and virulent anti-Communists who denounced the 'Yellow Peril'.

The perceived threat posed by the English language<sup>1</sup> to political, economic and social systems in China is one reason why, ever since the teaching of English began there, it has vacillated between high and low status, as indeed have all foreign languages since the Tang dynasty (Ross, 1993). In imperial times, the emperor ruled as a sovereign godhead in a hierarchical social system that combined politics and religion; erosion of power threatened the very fabric of the state. It was a system built around the notions of harmony and benevolent government, which included the observance of religious rites (Chen Li Fu, 1986). English represented very different values: it was the language of missionaries who preached Christian religions, some antagonistically denouncing Chinese beliefs and practices; of philosophers who propounded alternative social systems; of governments who pursued aggressive foreign policies; of peoples who, the Chinese believed, lacked the sophistication and refinement that a long history of unified nationhood and, in earlier times, of technological superiority bestowed upon the Chinese people. Indeed, it has been argued (e.g., Liao, 1990) that the fall of the last emperor was hastened by the controversies over how to deal with the powerful and aggressive foreign forces that were seeking to open up China for trade. And without the binding force of the imperial system, four decades of turbulence followed before the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established the PRC in 1949.

Paradoxically, since the Chinese military was embarrassed by Western weaponry, scholars and officials in the mid-nineteenth century (and periodically thereafter) called for the learning of English to be promoted in China (Teng and Fairbank, 1979). Their aim was national self-strengthening: English would provide access to Western technology and scientific expertise (Teng and Fairbank, 1979), and it was argued that, with care, cultural erosion might be avoided. There was an added political tension after 1949, until China embraced economic reforms in the late 1970s. The English language, although desirable for national economic development in China, was perceived to embody values that were undesirable and antithetical to the nature of Chinese culture and the ideology of the CCP (Dzau, 1990). One manifestation of this was the Campaign against Spiritual Pollution (*qingchu jinshen wuran*) in the mid-1980s that targeted vices such as pornography, gambling, prostitution and even disco dancing, which were portrayed as slipping into China through the open door of international trade. As a teacher in Taiyuan at the time, I was requested by the college authorities to desist from using Western songs as teaching material and my students were warned to minimize their interactions with me to matters of grammar and pedagogy.

Nevertheless, the growth of English in China has been phenomenal. Official records for 1957 show that there were just 843 secondary school teachers of English in the whole country (Ministry of Education, 1984). Yet, despite the traumatic experiences of the Cultural Revolution and other political movements with anti-Western elements, Chinese people have embraced the study of English in recent decades with fervour. Some 50 million schoolchildren are currently learning English, taught by approximately 400,000 teachers. The figures are increasing as more and more primary schools around the nation offer the subject, and as more and more teachers take up the challenge of teaching through English across the curriculum, as part of the 'bilingual education' policy that promotes the teaching of science and maths in secondary schools through the medium of English. English competence is a key component in the tertiary level entrance examinations, a factor that enhances the status of the subject on the school curriculum. Private tutelage and tuition schools offering English courses for schoolchildren and the general public abound, popping up like bamboo shoots after spring rain, to use a Chinese metaphor. English is desirable because it is the language of trade partners, investors, advisers, tourists and technical experts, and these economic imperatives have been enhanced by China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the awarding of the Olympic Games to Beijing in 2008.

My personal experiences as a teacher and textbook writer in China have afforded privileged access to a range of experiences. After training teachers of English in Taiyuan, I became involved in textbook development, teacher education programmes and research projects nationwide. In 1994, I visited the library in the People's Education Press (PEP), the curriculum development and publications unit in the Ministry of Education in Beijing, which has a rare, if not unique, collection of syllabuses and textbooks dating from 1949. The materials for the English Language curriculum on a secluded shelf seemed to encapsulate in a fascinating way the vagaries of China's development since 1949. Gradually, this book evolved from finding these materials. I wanted to investigate their story: the processes by which these syllabuses and textbooks had come to exist and, in most cases, then fall into disuse, and to analyse the ideas, values, and pedagogies that they incorporated. PEP officials offered generous encouragement and support for the study, and this access allowed me to build up my own collection of curriculum materials and to talk to key people who were directly involved in their production.

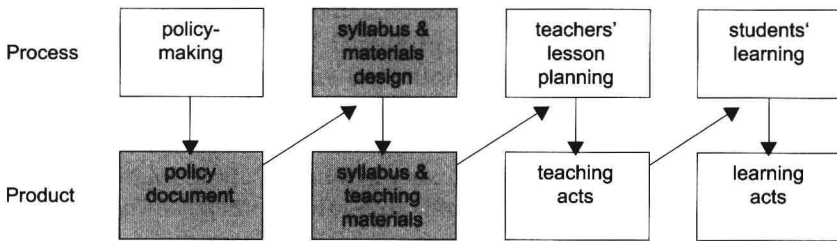
## Analytical approach

This book explores the complex interplay of political, economic, social and educational factors that have shaped the history of English in China, with

particular emphasis on the period after the founding of the PRC in 1949. The main focus is on the formal education system, most notably the English Language curriculum in junior secondary schools, on the grounds that the study of curriculum policy, including the processes of curriculum development and the products — syllabuses and textbooks — at the national level by the Ministry of Education, allows insights into the construction of an 'official' English, as well as what was considered as acceptable content in English. The book examines how, at times of heightened political tension, the state has sought to restrict the social and political impact of the language by controlling the English Language curriculum in formal education. On the other hand, the state has promoted English Language when economic development through international engagement has been a national priority. However, the findings of this book suggest that it would not be accurate to describe the shifting status of the language in the curriculum in terms of a pendulum swinging from one extreme to the other — as has been suggested by some researchers regarding general education policy in China, such as Chen Hsien's (1981) portrayal of swings between 'academic' (i.e., related to citizenship training and human resource development for economic modernization) and 'revolutionary' (i.e., ideologically-oriented) education; or a 'moderate' to 'radical' pendulum (Ruyen, 1970, cited in Löfstedt, 1980). Politicization of state policy does not mean a total neglect of economic concerns, and economic modernization does not mean that other agenda are absent. Instead, there is a contestation of economic, political, and social goals, resulting in tensions and negotiated outcomes. The nature of this contestation and subsequent outcomes has varied over time, but the general thrust towards an acceptance of English and of the need for cultural awareness has continued progressively throughout the period since 1949, with the exception of the Cultural Revolution. The fortunes of foreign language curricula, argues Ross (1992: 240), are a 'barometer of modernization', in that they register changes in pressure exerted by the prevailing socio-political climate. English, being particularly controversial, makes it a sensitive barometer.

This book uses the junior secondary school English Language curriculum as the means to examine how curriculum developers and textbook writers have confronted the shifting ambiguities and dilemmas concerning English. The reasons for selecting the junior secondary school curriculum arise partly from convenience (my involvement in curriculum development was at this level), partly from importance (curriculum developers in the PEP told me that most innovations in the English curriculum in China have been initiated at this level, and it is the stage of schooling, Year 7 to Year 9, at which most students have studied English) and partly from the need to limit the scope of the study to book length. The book asks fundamental questions concerning the English promoted by the state in China. What role has been ascribed to English, and how has it changed over time? What are the characteristics of this English,

and how have they changed over time? What are the explanations for such changes? What has been viewed as appropriate content for English textbooks? The analysis adopted for this study looks at the process of curriculum development as well as the product: the nature of the curriculum as constructed by the PEP. The relationship between the two levels is shown in Figure 1.1. Studying the process — identifying the stakeholders and their contributions; sorting out the priorities; and observing how tensions were handled — illuminates the contemporary social climate and values and how they impinged upon the construction of a state English. Studying the product reveals the nature of this English. Analysing the changes over time brings out strongly the particular features of China's English.



Note: Shaded area represents the main focus of this book.

Figure 1.1 Steps in curriculum decision-making (adapted from Johnson, 1989)

The study is located in the areas of the PEP's involvement in curriculum development. Despite its title as a press, the role of PEP has been to interpret state policy and operationalize it in the form of a syllabus and textbooks for individual subjects. The PEP forms a bridge between the macro-level of state policy and the micro-level of curriculum implementation in schools. Recent studies of curriculum development in China have described the complex interplay between macro- and micro-levels, thereby challenging the common portrayal of a homogeneous process, dominated by the central authorities and essentially centre-periphery in nature (e.g., Leung, 1989; Paine, 1992; Lai, 1994). Leung (1991) describes the process as 'democratic centralism'. Paine (1992) contends that the actual formulation of contemporary national educational policies has a strongly pluralistic quality through a process of *mosuo* (literally 'groping' or muddling through), whereby policies are formulated in the light of successful experiments at the grassroots and 'an evolutionary compromise' is achieved between central bureaucratic objectives and the practical lessons of local experience. While this book identifies the nature of shifts in the socio-political climate and their effect on issues of curriculum design and pedagogy in English Language teaching

at the macro-level, the primary focus is on how the PEP charts a course between competing and often conflicting forces that arise at both the macro- and micro-level. Little research work has been done in the field of English Language curriculum development in the PRC, either by Chinese or international scholars. Within the PRC, a large number of journals are devoted to aspects of English Language teaching, but they tend to be descriptive and prescriptive, being principally designed to promulgate the particular pedagogy associated with a new innovation. How the PEP handles the politically sensitive issues and questions of socio-economic policy linked to English Language curriculum development has rarely been investigated: the papers on this topic surveyed for this book were all written by members of the PEP, and tended to avoid critical analysis.

The second aspect of reform, the nature of the curriculum as constructed by the curriculum developers, will be approached principally through analyses of the English Language textbooks produced by the PEP, which, in China, are the main manifestation of the intended curriculum. The PEP's task of interpreting the policy statements of the politicians and translating them into curriculum documents (such as syllabuses or textbooks) that will be used in schools is both a sensitive one, given the often volatile nature of policy statements and the historically ambivalent official attitudes towards the English language, and a difficult one, for the skills, resources and support for English Language teaching in schools place constraints on policy formulation and on the implementation of policy. Added to this is the influence of experts in the field, including specialists in applied linguistics in tertiary institutions and foreign consultants; and, as emerged from this study as it developed, of teachers, whose acceptance of new materials and pedagogies was vital to the success of any curriculum reform. The political and educational forces are often in conflict, and the PEP had to navigate a mediating course, not just through the conflicting currents of the political ('red') and economic ('expert') policy streams, but also through various competing pedagogies, to produce a syllabus and teaching materials suitable for English Language instruction and learning in Chinese schools.

The especially contentious 'desirable evil' that the English language has represented to China makes it an excellent case study of how the state handles tensions in the school curriculum, as it throws into particularly sharp relief the processes that exist for this purpose. The issue of cultural transfer (and the potential for cultural erosion that is involved in the promotion of the study of English) is a central theme to the book — how the Chinese government, through the Ministry of Education, has handled the 'foreignness' of English since 1949. This book argues that a guiding principle of selective assimilation has been applied to different degrees at different times by Chinese authorities to questions of international transfer in many fields for the past 100 years or more, and has been applied to the English Language curriculum in the various

socio-political and economic climates of the different phases of history since 1949.

How has the role and status ascribed to English in the education system in China changed over time? To answer this question, evidence for the official role of English is drawn from policy documents, such as those relating to curriculum; policy actions, such as the setting up of new institutions; and policy debates. The question of status is more problematic. In this book, attention is given to both the official and popular status of English, to the relevant weighting given to English Language study in the curriculum of state educational institutions, and to the use of English in society. The attribute of 'low' status is applied in this analysis to the status of English when state policy reflected the view that the cultural or political threat of the language was greater than the technological benefits that its study might bring. Higher status is thus attributable when the balance of state policy was more inclined towards a positive view of English. Reference will also be made to popular attitudes towards the English language when these seem to be at variance with official attitudes.

Although the book is largely about language issues, it also touches on political, social and educational matters that are only tangentially related to the English Language curriculum in China. For instance, the analysis of the decision-making processes employed in the various curriculum innovations indicates how China has handled the relations between the centre and the periphery in education and other spheres of political activity. This centre-periphery tension has, historically, been an important factor in the history of Chinese politics, given the size of the country and the diversity of regional interests and ethnic backgrounds.

Major sources of data were key informants — Tang Jun, Liu Daoyi, Liu Jinfang and Neville Grant. Tang Jun had been involved in English Language curriculum development with the PEP from the early 1960s and, after the Cultural Revolution, had served as project leader for the curriculum reforms in 1978 and 1982. Liu Daoyi, who had been involved in the PEP work in the 1960s as a consultant, joined the PEP staff in 1977, and took over as project leader for the development of the 1993 curriculum. Liu Jinfang, who joined in 1977, was another long-serving member of staff at the PEP. Another key informant was from outside the PEP — Neville Grant, a textbook author working for Longman International, who had been the principal writer of the textbook series for the 1993 curriculum. I have also drawn on my own experiences as a member of the team of textbook writers working under Liu Daoyi and Grant.<sup>2</sup>

The data from key informants were complemented by an analysis of textbooks (in particular), syllabuses, and related curriculum documents, which were obtained from the PEP and other sources, such as the archives of colleagues in China and my own archives. Apple and Christian-Smith (1991)



highlight the important role of textbook in the education process, suggesting that, in general, the curriculum as experienced by most learners is defined more closely by textbooks rather than syllabuses and other documents. Venezky (1992) argues that textbooks are both cultural and curricular artefacts, possessing an intertextuality that links them to their antecedents and a validation bestowed by various mechanisms, such as production quality (binding, design, typography, etc.), or by association with the authorship and affiliation of authors, or by implications of improvement and currency by labels such as 'revised edition'. As a cultural artefact, the nature of textbooks is circumscribed to some extent by social, economic and technical conditions, such as contemporary printing techniques:

... texts are not simply "delivery systems" of "facts". They are at once the results of political, economic, and cultural activities, battles, and compromises. They are conceived, designed, and authored by real people with real interests. They are published within the political and economic constraints of markets, resources and power. And what texts mean and how they are used are fought over by communities with distinctly different commitments and by teachers and students as well. (Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991: 1-2)

As a curricular artefact, textbooks reflect the intended curriculum, as well as the promoted pedagogical approaches, either explicit (e.g., presentations of concepts to be grasped) or implicit (the nature and arrangement of exercises, for example), and a hidden curriculum (such as the values and meanings of the dominant culture) (Cherryholmes, 1988; Venezky, 1992). It is this view of textbooks as reflections of pedagogical constructs and socio-political values that forms the basis of the analysis of PRC textbook resources adopted in this study. The analysis recognizes that English Language curriculum products are shaped by considerations relating to three components at the level of design (adapted from White, 1988), which are:

- pedagogy: explicit and/or implicit beliefs and practices for teaching and learning;
- linguistic components: grammar, vocabulary, and language skills (e.g., reading, writing, listening and speaking);
- content: situational contexts and topics, including political and moral messages.

Taken individually, but especially when interconnected as a coherent whole, each component contributes to an understanding of the nature and role of English in China (Figure 1.2).