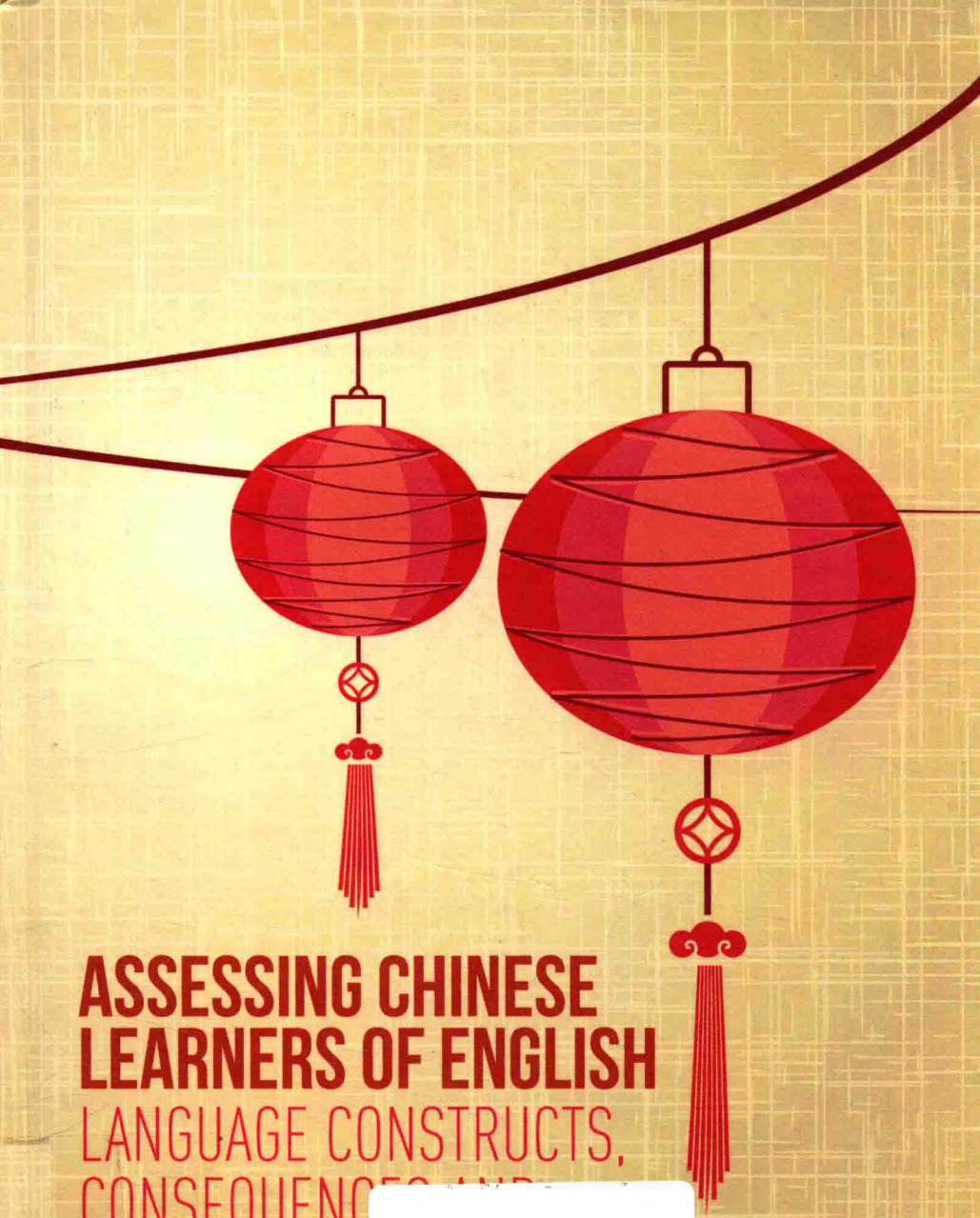

ASSESSING CHINESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

LANGUAGE CONSTRUCTS, CONSEQUENC[redacted] CONUNDRUM

EDITED BY **GUOXING YU** AND **YAN JIN**

Assessing Chinese Learners of English

Language Constructs, Consequences and Conundrums

Edited by

Guoxing Yu
University of Bristol, UK

and

Yan Jin
Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China

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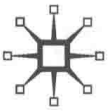

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Foreword

Guoxing Yu and Yan Jin point out in their introduction that a phenomenal number of Chinese learners of English are taking English language tests. English is one of the three key subjects (the other two being Chinese and mathematics) in Gao Kao – the national university entrance examinations. The College English Test (CET) has the most test takers of any test in the world every year, e.g. in 2012 alone it had 18 million test takers. There has been a substantial increase in the number of Chinese taking international English language tests. In 2010 there were over 300,000 Chinese who took International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and a similar number of Chinese taking TOEFL iBT (Test of English as a Foreign Language, internet-based test). Given the huge numbers of students whose lives are affected by local and international English language tests it is critical that test providers understand how policies and practices of assessing Chinese learners of English as a foreign language are intertwined with the social, political and educational systems in which the tests operate and in turn impact upon.

This volume makes a contribution to deepening the understanding of all those involved in testing Chinese students. It provides empirical evidence for test validation as well as insightful examples of research efforts which help us to better understand the characteristics of Chinese test takers, constructs of assessment (speaking in particular), assessment methods, purposes and impacts of assessment and assessment policies/innovations.

The authors look in detail at the characteristics of the Chinese learners being assessed, what makes Chinese learners of English different from learners of other first languages, the language constructs that underlie some of the tests sat by Chinese learners, various assessment methods and innovations, to what extent the social, political and educational systems in China affect the students' learning motivations and test preparation strategies, Chinese students' performance on a number of English language tests and variables affecting this performance, how different stakeholders cope with assessment policy changes and the consequences of assessment. It is a welcome addition to the increasing number of publications on the assessment of Chinese learners of

English and also contributes to the general knowledge base of English language assessment.

It is now over twenty-five years since I started working with Chinese colleagues on the CET test at Shanghai Jiao Tong University and the TEM test at Shanghai International Studies University. In relation to these Chinese tests alone a substantial contribution to test theory and practice has been made.

The College English Test Validation study I was involved with in 1991–1995 was the first of its kind in China since large-scale standardized language tests came into being in the mid-1980s (and among the first in the world on major examinations). Through collaborative research, the study contributed significantly to the growth and development of professional language testing expertise in China. A full history of the validation project can be found in Yang, H. and Weir, C.J. *Validation Study of the National College English Test* by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (1998).

I was also involved with the Test for English Majors (TEM) validation project in 1993–1996. The immediate purpose of the project was to review the existing TEM-4 and TEM-8 in terms of content, construct, predictive and concurrent validity and to establish their reliability through statistical analysis of the test data. By developing enhanced procedures for item writing and marker standardization, it was hoped that future tests would better reflect the English language performance of the test takers. The project's long-term aim was to improve the positive washback effects on ELT teaching and learning in Chinese universities. The study was published as Shen, Z., Green, R and Weir, C.J. *The Test for English Majors (TEM) Validation Study* by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (1997).

Such cases of extended international collaboration (as do those in this book) certainly helped meet the local needs in test development and validation by providing a global perspective and also helped to develop the capacity of language testing research and practice in China itself. However, the benefits are never only one-way. The socio-cognitive framework, first comprehensively elaborated in my book *Language Testing and Validation* (Palgrave, 2005) has its roots in my earlier academic work (see *Communicative Language Testing* (1990) and *Understanding and Developing Language Tests* (1993)), which arose out of this earlier collaborative work in China first as senior UK consultant on the national College English Test (Yang and Weir 1998). It developed further in work on the Test for English Majors (Shen, Green and Weir 1997) and the Advanced English Reading Test (Weir, Yang and

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Jin 2000). Working with Chinese colleagues on these tests involved developing a clearer specification of the operations and performance conditions underlying language test performance. These provided the conceptual basis for the cognitive and contextual validity parameters that appear in my 2005 book for reading, listening, writing and speaking, which were further developed in the constructs volumes in the Studies in Language Testing (SiLT) series (Shaw and Weir 2007, Khalifa and Weir 2009, Taylor (Ed.) 2011, and Geranpayeh and Taylor 2013) by Cambridge English and Cambridge University Press.

As Bachman (2009) pointed out in his Foreword to an earlier volume in this area edited by Cheng and Curtis (2009) – *English Language Assessment and the Chinese Learner*, "the language testing issues discussed ... are not unique to the assessment of Chinese Learners' English ...." The studies in this volume similarly make an important contribution to the global knowledge base of English language assessment as well as to our knowledge of the testing of Chinese learners in particular. In addressing Chinese learners of English, the authors make an important contribution to better understanding the complexity and dynamics of assessing Chinese learners of English in different educational contexts and levels. The studies clearly illustrate the need to take into account the social, political and educational contexts in which English language tests and assessment innovations and policies take place in China.

Cyril J. Weir
Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment (CRELLA)
University of Bedfordshire
April 2015

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Notes on Contributors

Editors

Guoxing Yu is Reader in Language Education and Assessment at the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol. He is an Executive Editor of *Assessment in Education*, and on editorial boards of *Assessing Writing*, *Language Assessment Quarterly*, *Language Testing*, and *Language Testing in Asia*. His articles have appeared in international journals including *Applied Linguistics*, *Assessing Writing*, *Assessment in Education*, *Educational Research*, *Language Assessment Quarterly*, and *Language Testing*. Email: Guoxing.Yu@bristol.ac.uk

Yan Jin is Professor of Applied Linguistics at the School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University. She is also Chair of the National College English Testing Committee in China. She is on the editorial board of international journals such as *Language Testing*, *Classroom Discourse*, and Chinese journals such as *Foreign Languages in China*, *Foreign Language World*, *Foreign Language Education in China*, *Contemporary Foreign Languages Studies*. She is also co-editor of *Language Testing in Asia*. Email: yjin@sjtu.edu.cn

Contributors

Chan Chen is a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages at Zhejiang Gongshang University in China. Her research interests are discourse analysis, language testing and corpus linguistics. Email: 13588161993@163.com

Qiuxian Chen is an associate professor at Shanxi University, China. She has over two decades' experience in English language teaching practice and research. She received her PhD in 2011 from the Queensland University of Technology, Australia. Her expertise is in the field of English as a Foreign Language assessment and assessment policy change. Email: chenqx@sxu.edu.cn

Xiangdong Gu is Professor and Director of the Research Centre of Language, Cognition and Language Application in Chongqing University, China. She holds a PhD in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics from Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and furthered her study and research at the University of California, Los Angeles and

University of Cambridge as a visiting professor. She is an academic consultant of Cambridge English and an external reviewer of several academic journals and university presses in China. She has authored and presented widely on language assessment. Her current interests mainly focus on content validity studies and the impact of large-scale and high-stakes English tests in China. Email: xiangdonggu@263.net

Liz Hamp-Lyons is a senior consultant to the College English Test (CET). She was Head of English and Chair Professor at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and is now a member of CRELLA (Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment) at the University of Bedfordshire, UK. Her research interests include the development and validation of English language writing and speaking assessments, assessment for academic and specific purposes, learning-oriented language assessment and language teacher assessment literacy. Email: lizhamp-lyons@outlook.com

Daniel M.K. Lam is a PhD candidate in Linguistics and English Language and Teaching Fellow in TESOL at the University of Edinburgh. His primary research interests are in conversation analysis and language testing, in particular the qualitative validation of speaking tests and assessments. Email: s0964731@exseed.ed.ac.uk

Shwu-wen Lin is an assistant professor at the General Education Center, National Taipei University of Nursing and Health Sciences, Taiwan. She holds a PhD in Language Testing from the University of Bristol. She has completed a research project on GEPT Advanced writing funded by the Language Training and Testing Center in Taiwan. Email: andrelsw@ntunhs.edu.tw

Lyn May is a senior lecturer in TESOL at the Queensland University of Technology, Australia. Her research interests focus on second language assessment and pedagogy, interactional competence, and the oracy demands of tertiary study. Email: lynette.may@qut.edu.au

David D. Qian is Professor of Applied Linguistics in the Department of English at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He is also the founding Co-President (2014, 2015) and President (2016, 2017) of the Asian Association for Language Assessment. His publications cover a variety of topics in applied linguistics, ranging from standardised English language testing, teacher-based assessment, corpus linguistics and ESL/EFL vocabulary research. As a Principal Investigator, he has directed over 20 research projects funded respectively by the Educational Testing Service,

USA, Research Grants Council of Hong Kong, Language Training and Testing Center, Taiwan, and Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Email: David.Qian@Polyu.edu.hk

Nick Saville is a member of the Cambridge English Senior Management Team and is responsible for directing the work of the Research and Thought Leadership Division. He holds a PhD from the University of Bedfordshire in language test impact, and degrees in Linguistics and in TEFL from the University of Reading. Nick is the elected Manager of the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) and has close involvement with European initiatives, including the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). His long-term research interests include the implementation of quality management into assessment systems, and the investigation of test impact in school contexts using mixed methods research designs. Email: saville.n@cambridgeenglish.org

Jonathan Schmidgall is an associate research scientist at the Educational Testing Service in the United States. His research has focused on the assessment of oral proficiency, and takes a broad view on how the purpose and context of interaction may impact various components of the validity argument for test use. He recently received his PhD in applied linguistics with a certificate in advanced quantitative measurement in educational research from the University of California, Los Angeles. Email: jschmidgall@ets.org

Chanchan Tang has taught English in Wenzhou No.2 Secondary Vocational School, China, for five years. As a teacher, she is interested in studying how Chinese students can learn English more effectively and has published a few pieces of research on this area. Email: tccwhale@hotmail.com

Jeanine Treffers-Daller is Professor of Second Language Education, Institute of Education, University of Reading, UK. She has published widely on the measurement of vocabulary knowledge and use among bilinguals and second language learners and has co-edited two volumes on this topic: Daller, Milton and Treffers-Daller (2007). *Modelling and assessing vocabulary knowledge* and Richards et al. (2009). *Vocabulary Studies in L1 and L2 acquisition: the interface between theory and application.* She is a member of the editorial board of the *International Journal of Bilingualism* and of *Bilingualism, Language and Cognition.* Email: j.c.treffers-daller@reading.ac.uk

Lei Wang is a professor at the School of Foreign Languages at Zhejiang Gongshang University in China, where she teaches and supervises at undergraduate and graduate levels in linguistics and applied linguistics. Her research interests include discourse analysis, pragmatics, language testing and teaching English as a foreign language in China. Email: wanglei@zjgsu.edu.cn

Yuan Wang is a senior research assistant at the Educational Testing Service in the United States. She has been involved in a variety of research projects on English language assessment and learning. She received her master's degree in TESOL from Teachers College, Columbia University. Email: ywang@ets.org

Xiaoming Xi is Senior Director of the Research Center for English Language Learning and Assessment at the Educational Testing Service in the United States. She has published widely in areas including validity and fairness issues in the broader context of test use, validity frameworks for automated scoring, automated scoring of speech, and task design, scoring and rater issues in speaking assessment. She holds a PhD in second/foreign language assessment from the University of California, Los Angeles. Email: xxi@ets.org

Shasha Xu received her PhD in English Language and Literature from Zhejiang University, with a special focus on the washback effect of a high-stakes language test in China. She has participated in several funded research projects including washback studies and development of computerized adaptive tests. She has published in *Language in Society* and *Journal of Second Language Writing*. Her primary research interests are the impact of large-scale tests on teaching and learning, and the teaching of speaking and writing. Email: xushashaecho@126.com

Lin Zhang is a lecturer at the School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University. She has also been working at the Administration Office of the National College English Testing Committee since the year 2004. Her research interests include oral assessment, language test development and validation. Email: zhang_lin@sjtu.edu.cn

Ying Zhang completed her PhD research in Monash University, Australia and currently works as Assessment Manager at the OET Centre, Cambridge Boxhill Language Assessment, Australia. She was formerly an associate professor of English, College of Foreign Languages, Tianjin Normal University, China. Her research interests are language

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assessment and testing, English for specific purpose, EIL and TESOL. Email: barbara.zhang@oet.com.au

Ying Zheng is a lecturer at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Southampton. She specializes in psychometric analysis of large-scale language testing data, English as second/foreign language learner characteristics and quantitative research methods. The courses she teaches include Assessment of Language Proficiency, Research & Inquiry in Applied Linguistics and Quantitative Research Methods. Email: Ying.Zheng@soton.ac.uk

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