

# Where are we going and where have we been?

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A response to 'Back To basics' (Zhou & Zha, this volume)

In their article, 'Back to basics', Zhou and Zha critique a 'disheartening picture' they found in my paper 'The English major crisis in China' (2019) and proposes an alternative view based on a model reform project. I will take the opportunity of this invitation to respond to reflect further on my study and the issue under debate.

While I would reconsider – at least in my case – what the authors say about 'Humanities' (capitalization in original) and 'basics', I acknowledge the admirable efforts they have been making towards an idealized, 'should-be' blueprint for English major programs in China. However, they seem to have left unaddressed some essential details which may offset the efforts on a large scale. Before jumping to the conclusion that 'the English major programme will play a critical role in promoting humanistic education in Chinese universities', readers would expect to see some key doubts explained. For example, should the proposed 'Humanities-based approach' base itself on the Western humanities or *renwen* (the modern Chinese equivalent of 'humanities') with its culturally specific significance (Hsiung, 2015)? For boosting the country's supposedly lacking humanistic education, in what way can a foreign language major ensure its instrumental role in a largely monolingual context?

My intention to conduct the study was not, as the critique assumes, to dramatize the scene and to devalue the reform efforts. As perhaps the last person to actually *want* to cavil about the program, I was simply intrigued by the discussion and wanted to find more about the 'crisis' discourse. That the idea of a 'crisis' arose in the first place may not be completely random, and interest in the debate does not seem to have died down. The call for the program to seek its humanistic root is not new, however, as distinguished English educators

such as Wang Shouren (2001) initiated similar proposals almost two decades ago. Over the years, enthusiasm in revolutionizing the English major remains, while the changes brought by the country's rapid growth are dramatic and may have rendered the efforts less effective than they could be. On this point, I would argue that, although some of the impediments faced by English majors are shared by the changing humanities subjects at large (Qu, 2020), the resistance against the growth of a foreign language major can be stronger in some contexts than others.

One major change is the emerging alternatives to learn or acquire a foreign language brought about by technology and opening-up policies. One prominent trend is the increasingly common 'overseas experience' for the country serves as 'the largest source of international students' (MOE, 2018). In the job market, home-bred English majors may



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expect mounting pressure from overseas returnee peers who are often taken as enjoying a natural advantage in the language on top of advantages in disciplinary specialties. When it comes to the program under reform, the difficulties identified in the comment data are real. Apart from curriculum design and faculty development, the quality of delivery is also subject to factors including the sociocultural and ideopolitical circumstances of the time and lack and uneven distribution of educational resources across institutions. For instance, a ‘negative list’ published by the Ministry of Education (MOE) recently removes the teaching of the International Phonetic Alphabet from primary school English curriculum and discourages practicing writing the English letters among lower-graders (Lei, 2020). Meanwhile, blocking access to the global internet – a most affordable source for learning materials – certainly is not helping.

Taken together, the points raised in the response seem to suggest that some programs are more successful, more valued, and more ‘real’ than others and thus that a distinction between the ‘real’ and the ‘fake’ English majors is necessary for understanding the issue at hand. While I agree that a major can easily lose its accountability if not founded on a sound knowledge base and that skills are not part of a knowledge system, I would point out two major concerns about this idea. First, the English major education in China started largely as a language personnel training program to serve the country’s needs for modernization. There was a time when the value of such skill-focused education was fully recognized and appreciated. It was only when the country outgrew such needs and when new needs arose which could not be sufficiently addressed by skilful personnel alone that the major began to lose its legitimacy and status as a university subject. Another concern is that although knowledge has been supplemented from a hotchpotch of subjects, the effect of teaching depends much on how well the knowledge can be processed by the students. If decoding of the material happens only on a surface level, or if even understanding remains a problem, how could students expect to explore the humanistic depths of the text? As language proficiency takes time to develop, students often do not stay long enough for things like critical analysis and meaningful reflection to matter. Therefore, rather than bringing the program *back* to ‘basics’, perhaps a more realistic restatement of the vision is to *go forward* to strengthen the academic basis of the subject with the belief that an internationalized China would create an environment favorable for

equal learning opportunities and easy access to the world’s stock of knowledge.

Following their practice, I would like to draw from my own experiences first as an English major student and then as an English major teacher to illustrate what an individual in the system may expect to experience and what efforts one can make to combat the situation. Born and raised in an average Chinese family with no capital investment in foreign language learning, I happened to develop a strong interest in English and taught myself the language by exposing myself to anything I could find in English. As I could not afford to travel and study abroad, I thought the best way for me to indulge my childhood passion was to become a student majoring in the language.

Hence, I became an English major student, yet perhaps not quite a ‘decent’ one, as I was admitted to a second-tier university in central China due to my failure in *gaokao* (‘college entrance exam’). The program run by the university was of a ‘standard’ design with an emphasis on strengthening basic skills. The teachers were mainly Chinese trained in local programs as English major graduates. The classes were conducted in a traditional fashion and we had routine dictation exercises for the compulsory main courses. Despite good grades in high school, I found my experience with the language starkly lacking and worked hard to keep pace. Meanwhile, my passion was rekindled in the optional literature and linguistic courses where I could discuss with the teachers materials that did not make very good sense yet appealed to me greatly. I learned much from the inspiring teachers who helped me develop the ability to use English with more confidence and ease.

After graduating with a BA in English, I went on to pursue graduate studies in a prestigious university in a coastal Chinese city where I furthered my exploration into the language and acquired some research skills. Two years ago, I finished my graduate studies and started job hunting with a freshly-minted doctoral degree. Although I wished to continue my journey by becoming a university teacher in the discipline, it did not prove easy to get even a chance for an interview. The common reasons for refusal were one, I had no ‘overseas background’ and two, I had an ‘average’ BA degree (apart from an obligatory requirement for an overseas Ph.D. degree, competitive employers would often refuse to consider candidates with an undergraduate degree obtained from a non-key university, possibly on the grounds that mediocrity is a permanent trait). For those that did allow me an interview, a speedy decision was often reached by a

glimpse at the publication list in my CV. Rarely was my experience with the language – learning, teaching, and reflection – part of the conversation. Thus, the desired candidate, potentially a role model for the students, tends to be defined and measured by visible qualifications and achievements, which are sorted by stereotypes. Paradoxically, these employers are the providers of the country's leading programs qualified for the 'real' English major education. The logic that a discipline commissioned to explore human experience promotes an ignorance thereof does not seem to me very convincing.

After a one-year gap, I finally had a chance at a local university where I have been working with 200 English major students at different levels. Some are still struggling with English grammar basics, while others are busy studying a minor or taking extra curricular training courses to prepare for their future. As I decided that it was probably too early to introduce them to Shakespeare, I taught the basic skills to those who needed them and encouraged all to use the language for expressive and communicative purposes rather than for the purpose of passing exams, an unfortunate yet prevailing belief among the students. Above all, I would motivate them to explore the beauty of languages in general and appreciate the differences between varieties.

Perhaps in the eyes of expert educators, mine was a typical case of a 'fake' English major education. Nonetheless, it was a real delight to see students falling in love with English and eager to learn and work hard. Perhaps if carefully delivered, there is still a chance for a 'fake' program to provide learning experience along the humanistic line of thought, in the sense of linguistically empowering the students to realize their full potentials.

Although my experiences above suggest an English major of a lesser kind, I would resist the deduction that what I had been receiving was not humanistic education. As Professor Drew Faust put it, '[s]uch inquiry teaches us how to scrutinize the thing at hand, even in the thick dust of danger

or drama or disorienting strangeness' (Powell, 2016). Thanks to my experience as a 'fake' English major, I now see the value of staying critical and more importantly, being able to convey and share my thoughts in a language I had no 'authentic' contact with.

Despite its loose denotation and unwelcome connotation, a crisis can be read and approached in more ways than one. Some may see it as a false alarm, while others a changing agent. In the case of English majors in China, perhaps the relatively meagre progress on a large scale warrants the need for a remedy stronger than a celebrated success story. As the Chinese saying goes, 'bitter medicine cures; harsh advice helps'. Awaking to some of the harsh realities may help us locate where we are and continue our sail towards the Ithaka.

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