Is English a threat to Chinese language and culture?

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The 'threat' of English in China might be balanced by the promotion of Chinese language and culture

Introduction

In an article published in *English Today* in 2005, Niu and Woolf contend that:

> EFL is a modern day Trojan horse filled with EFL teachers/soldiers or missionaries, armed with English words rather than bullets, intent upon re-colonizing the world to remake it in the image of Western democracy. China has brought the Trojan Horse within its gates and the army of EFL teachers is hard at work Westernizing China.

The argument that English, and by extension the ELT industry, is a threat to local culture and society was first brought to public attention in China in 1995, when a group of graduate students in an elite university in Shanghai failed an important Chinese exam (Zhou, 2007). The blame for this failure was ascribed to both the intensive learning of English in college and a concomitant ignorance of Chinese studies; and the news that was generated by the incident sparked a great deal of reflection and critique about educational priorities in China. In the years since, there has been much debate about whether it is necessary for the Chinese to learn English and whether the English language will have negative effects on Chinese language and culture. For example, Xie Kechang, a professor at the Taiyuan University of Science and Technology, questioned the necessity for the entire nation to learn English during a speech at the National Committee of CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) in 2004 (Cai, 2006). Other scholars have asserted that 'teaching in English and writing in English in China [has] resulted in a number of people who are not able to write acceptable Chinese'

and that 'the internationalization of English is making Chinese a dialect' (Zhou, 2007: 85).

This discourse of English as a threat, known in Chinese as *yingyu weixie lun* 英语威胁论 [*lit.* 'English language threat discussion'] has become particularly marked following changes in a language policy which previously demonized English, as well as internationalization initiatives such as those surrounding the Beijing Olympics in 2008. As English has become more prominent in the country in the last ten years, so public controversy about its role has grown. Yet while assertions and evaluations of the sort quoted above have frequently been

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voiced by scholars and educationalists, there has, to date, been a relative lack of empirical data on the perspectives of language learners in China. What do learners and users of English in China themselves think about the effect that English is having on the society and culture in which they live? Do they feel that the language is inextricably associated with cultural and political values in the way that Niu and Woolf assert? And how do these arguments affect the students' attitudes to learning the language, and to their own sense of cultural identity? This article will investigate these issues by means of data collected from questionnaire surveys and interviews with a broad range of people invested in the learning of English; and in doing so, it will consider how the discourse of *yingyu weixie* ('English as a threat') in China fits within broader debates about the hegemony of English in the era of globalization.

Global languages and local cultures

Before moving to the analysis of the data, it is worth contextualizing the discourse of *yingyu weixie* within the theoretical work that has examined the hegemonic role that English plays around the world. Studies which examine the political influence and interests of global ELT have taken various focuses over the last quarter of a century. The metaphor of 'English as a Trojan horse' was first used by Cooke (1988), who argued that English operates around the world as a language both of imperialism and of particular class interests. Earlier, he and Judd (1983) drew attention to the moral and political implications of global English teaching in terms of the purported threat it poses to indigenous languages and the often unjustified role it plays as a gatekeeper to better jobs in many societies. This concept of linguistic imperialism was then expanded upon by Phillipson in his 1992 book of the same name, where it was investigated as an important strand of cultural imperialism.

One of the effects of English's dominance as a global language has, according to Day (1985), been a process of 'linguistic genocide' among smaller, indigenous languages. This idea was further developed by Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (e.g. 1995) who asserted that the global spread of English causes a complex disruption in linguistic ecologies, which has been accompanied by the number of languages in the world falling at an ever-increasing speed. The spread of English, they argue, is a form of cultural imperialism because it supports a global system of world trade which advantages rich and powerful countries while disadvantaging poorer ones. All these arguments are based on long-standing TESOL principles which view language and culture as closely interrelated, and suggest that to learn a language is to learn a culture. According to this line of thinking, the spread of English around the globe inevitably promotes Western cultural values, and places local languages in a disadvantageous position.

The idea of English as a cultural or political 'Trojan Horse' has also been critiqued, however. For example, Graddol (2006) argues that the downward trend in worldwide linguistic diversity began before the rise of English as a global *lingua franca*, and hence, to attribute the current endangerment of smaller languages to the spread of English is to ignore the causal complexity in sociolinguistic patterns of language shift. And while linguistic imperialism may be able to explain the deliberate promotion of English (usually via the ELT industry) by powerful 'centre' countries, it overlooks the fact that the spread of the language is a two-way process (Sonntag, 2003), and that in many instances the choice to learn English is a voluntary one taken by those in the periphery who wish to draw on the social and linguistic capital that the language affords. Powerful as the argument advocated by Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas for 'linguistic human rights' (i.e. the idea that communities' local languages should be legally protected to prevent language shift) may seem, this has also been criticized for running counter to the role that global languages such as English play in trajectories of upward social mobility. The criticism is that, ironically, the linguistic human rights paradigm can prevent peripheral or marginalized groups from achieving such mobility by tying them, through their local language with its limited reach, to their locality (Blommaert, 2004).

How does the case of China fit in with these competing models? There are two important factors which set the Chinese situation apart from many others. The first is to do with the history of English in China; the second with China's current geopolitical status and its relationship with the powerful Anglophone countries. A brief review of this history indicates that, up until the early 19th century, all foreign languages, including English, were regarded as *Yi* ('barbarian') languages. As such, English had very little status in the country, and learning and knowledge of it were not respected. From the mid 19th century, following China's defeat by the British in the Opium Wars and the subsequent 'Self-strengthening'

movement (洋务运动), English education was formally introduced for the first time into schools. The learning of English was strictly limited to a small group of people, however, and the purpose behind it – to act as a tool for the transfer of practical Western knowledge – can be seen in slogans such as 'to learn from the barbarian to check them' (师夷长技以制夷) and 'Chinese knowledge as the foundation and Western knowledge for utility' (中学为体、西学为用). English was therefore not seen as a challenge to Chinese, but as an instrument that would bolster national identity.

It was not until the late 1970s, with the introduction of the Four Modernizations policy and the Opening and Reform policies, that English began to gain in popularity. Due to these policies, increased educational, occupational and economic advantages became attached to English language learning. The commitment to learning the language further intensified in the 1990s, and was officially encouraged when Zhang Xinsheng, the then Vice-Minister of Education, publicly stated in 2002 that 'with China's accession to the World Trade Organization and the approaching Olympics in 2008 more than ever is it a priority for young Chinese to learn and improve their language skills' ('Government Encourage Public to Learn English', *China Daily*, 10 February 2002). Since then, English has been embraced both officially and by the general public. It has been listed as a compulsory subject from primary school through to college education, English-medium instruction at the primary and secondary levels has been introduced as part of the education reforms (Hu, 2009), and bilingual kindergartens have sprouted up in major cities and have become the first choice of many younger Chinese parents (Zhou, 2007).

The popularity – and growth – of English in China is relatively recent, therefore, and prior to this, the language was specifically held at a distance. Unlike many of the contexts in which linguistic imperialism has been investigated, China is not a postcolonial country, and the roots that the language has there are relatively shallow and for the most part the result of internationalization and then globalization policies from the late twentieth century onwards. Furthermore, China is an increasingly powerful economic and political world player, and Chinese is a major global language in its own right. This also makes the situation very different from those contexts which the linguistic human rights paradigm has focused on, where there is a striking power imbalance between English and the local language. The discourse of *yingyu weixie*, therefore, has notably different

foundations from many of the strands in the hegemony of English debate.

This craze for English in China has led to some daunting statistics. In 2003, it was reported that 'over 200 million children, about 20% of the total in the world, are learning in English-medium schools, and about 13 million young people at universities' (Jiang, 2003: 3). By 2006, the figure for English learners in China had risen to 350 million, supplemented by young professionals, policemen, taxi drivers and retired people who were not affiliated to any formal institutions but who chose to learn English to prepare themselves for social events such as the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and Shanghai World Expo in 2010. This figure is roughly equivalent to the total number of native English speakers in the world (Seargeant, 2012). But behind this English mania, how many of these learners consider or are concerned about the purported association between English and Western cultural values? And what is their attitude towards the impact of English on Chinese language and culture? These are the questions that the research examines.

Data and analysis

The questionnaire survey

The data for the study were collected via a questionnaire and face-to-face interviews conducted in 2008. The aim of the questions was to examine how the research respondents perceive the impact of English on Chinese language and culture. The questionnaires were distributed to 907 respondents in total, comprising English learners both in formal learning institutions (university teachers and students) and outside such institutions (working professionals and retired people). The participants were all living in urban environments, and all have some investment in the learning of English. Items 1 and 2 on the questionnaire probe the learners' beliefs on the impact of English on competence in the Chinese language. Items 3 and 4 concern beliefs on the impact of English on Chinese culture. Items 5 and 6 invite respondents to express their opinions on the negative description of English. The results are summarized below.

The questionnaire results are clear enough to allow the following conclusions. Firstly, in terms of the impact of English language on the Chinese language, 56.5% of respondents disagree or strongly disagree with the supposition that 'the popularization of English will reduce Chinese people's native language competence'; 85.1% people disagree or strongly disagree that 'the

Table: Learners' beliefs about the impact of English on Chinese language and culture

	Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. The popularization of English will reduce Chinese people's native language competence.	6.8%	15.8%	20.9%	40.0%	16.5%
2. The popularization of English will one day cause the extinction of the Chinese language.	1.9%	3.2%	9.8%	31.3%	53.8%
3. Part of the culture of English-speaking countries has penetrated Chinese culture already.	17.9%	59.7%	16.8%	4.6%	1.0%
4. The popularization of English will impede the development of Chinese culture.	6.2%	9.9%	21.9%	45.4%	16.6%
5. The popularization of English is a form of 'soft' colonization.	4.3%	9.4%	21.1%	46.4%	18.8%
6. English is like a 'Trojan horse' – it appears beneficial to China while in fact it is harmful.	3.0%	4.1%	33.7%	43.1%	16.1%

popularization of English will one day cause the extinction of the Chinese language'. Secondly, with regard to the cultural effects, an overwhelming 77.6% people indicate that they agree or strongly agree that part of the culture of English-speaking countries has already penetrated Chinese culture, but at the same time, 62% of them also show a confidence in the integrity of Chinese culture and a belief that the popularization of English will not impede its development. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents show disagreement with the negative description of English: 65.2% people disagree or strongly disagree with the view that 'the popularization of English is a form of soft colonization', and 59.2% of people disagree or strongly disagree with the point of view that 'English is like a Trojan horse'.

The interviews

As the questionnaire findings show that the majority of English learners agree that some elements of English culture are influencing China, but do not agree that it is a threat, individual interviews were also conducted in order to investigate these issues in further detail. We include here one extended extract from these interviews, which illustrates an engagement with the issue which goes beyond simply caricaturing the influence of

English as good or bad. This interview was with Bai, a 22-year old college student who majored in English. The interview was conducted in Chinese and the extract was translated by one of the authors and proofread by a bilingual English editor. Bai said that he had been strongly influenced by his Western friends, and his response gives a reflective and measured appraisal of the question.

In this extract, Bai is of the opinion that English will have an impact on Chinese culture, but that this does not amount to a threat. He reflects on the ways that some Chinese have been influenced by Western culture but expresses a confidence that the impact of English is not causing change at a fundamental level due to a deep-rooted sense of current cultural identity. The underlying ideological framework for this point of view is one in which, in Hobsbawm's words (1990: 51), 'the national language is . . . the primordial foundation of national culture and the matrix of the national mind', and thus 'Chinese culture and the Chinese way of living' (as Bai puts it) remains as a touchstone for national cultural identity. As long as this is not abandoned, he feels, English can exist alongside a Chinese lingua-culture without adverse effects.

It is Bai's critique of geopolitical dynamics which reveals more of a scepticism about the current influence of English, and specifically links

Extract:	
1	I feel English will have a strong influence on Chinese culture.
2a	But if you do not abandon Chinese culture and the Chinese way of living,
2b	nor try too hard to immerse yourself into white people's social circles,
2c	I don't think the problem would be too significant.
3	Now Beijing is a very international metropolis.
4	At Sanlitun pub streets, there is drug and there are prostitutes.
5a	And there is not much difference between what people eat, drink and use
5b	with those abroad.
6a	But when people take off their clothes and go to sleep in their beds at night,
6b	their dreams are still about China and they are still Chinese 'in their bones'.
7	I can feel that clearly.
8	Moreover, their English is good.
9a	They could become aggressive,
9b	but being Chinese does not mean you cannot be aggressive.
10	Some Chinese are aggressive too.
11	I feel that the power of America and the western world is too strong.
12a	In reality, the expansion of a language leads in due course to the expansion
12b	of its economy.
13	It has been so for thousands of years.
14a	Without the profit motive, there would have been no colonies,
14b	and English would not have spread to so many countries.
15a	Today we do not use firearms to
15b	impose English on other countries.
16a	Instead, it takes the form of trade, the form of economic, political or
16b	multilateral cooperation.
17	But I feel that it can only be a battle between economies.
18a	You can see there are so many foreigners who come to China to learn
18b	Chinese now.
19a	Why are the Chinese no longer being looked down upon
19b	as they were 20 years ago?
20a	Years ago, many Chinese did not want to smoke Chinese local brand
20b	cigarettes as they felt they were inferior.
20c	but now, we often say that we should support our national brands.
21	This change took place only within two decades.
22a	So if we just discuss changes in culture without exploring the
22b	'invisible hand' – the role played by the economy,
23	I feel it would be difficult to understand the phenomenon thoroughly.

language issues to those of political and cultural power. Language issues are only one element in a larger complex of factors, however, and he identifies economics as the principal driver in modern global politics. He argues that while in the past the expansion of English accompanied military

conquest, the power of a language now may take 'soft' forms, such as 'trade, economic and political or multilateral cooperation'. He does not dwell on this to any great extent, however, nor does he say that English exerts any great impact on local cultures (as is argued in many critiques of the influence of linguistic imperialism), but instead attributes the influence of languages on the worldwide stage to 'a battle between economies'. The swift recent development of China means that, if the country's economic power remains strong, there is no worry about the threat of English to Chinese language and culture. In Bai's evaluation of the situation, if English is used as a tool to strengthen China's economy, there need be no worry about the loss of culture.

Discussion

We can see from the data that, although the impact of English on China is certainly felt in some capacity by the respondents, they also show great confidence in the integrity and prosperity of Chinese language and culture. What lies behind these beliefs? An answer to this can, perhaps, be found by contextualizing the discussion within the social history of English-language policies in China. As we noted earlier, for much of Chinese history, foreign languages were regarded as barbarian languages and were to be learnt divorced from any cultural or ideological implications (beyond those of the Chinese state itself, of course), under state sponsorship and strict state supervision (Bolton, 2006). This attitude, along with the instrumental view of English education described above, has remained a constant since English first came to China (although it has taken different forms in different eras). Even at the outset of the enactment of the Reform and Opening policy at the end of the 1970s, when English was officially announced as the main foreign language in school education, it was still regarded as a potential source of 'spiritual pollution' (*jing shen wu ran* 精神污染) (An, 1984; Yue, 1983). Hence, the socio-cultural values associated with English (in so far as it operates as the national language of various Western countries) were avoided as much as possible. It could be argued, therefore, that the slogan of 'Chinese knowledge as the foundation and Western knowledge for utility' (*zhong xue wei ti, xi xue wei yong* 中学为体、西学为用) is still a deeply-enshrined principle guiding the learning of English in China.

It is also the case that after English was embraced from the 1990s onwards in the service of a modernization and internationalization agenda, the issue of any 'negative influence' (i.e. the potential socio-cultural influence that English might exert on Chinese language and culture) was downplayed. Both the *Curriculum Requirements at the Compulsory Education Stage (below age 16)* and the *Curriculum Requirements at the Senior High Education Stage (age 16–18)* of 2003 talk in terms of foreign language teaching involving knowledge about the history, social customs and culture of the target country, and the fact that this will assist students in their understanding and appreciation of their home culture, while also cultivating a global outlook. These policies also speak of English language classes enhancing students' cross-cultural competence by nurturing an awareness and appreciation of cultural differences (Pan, 2011). In other words, while the policies encourage the teaching of the culture of Anglophone countries, at the same time, the teaching requirements stress the importance of incorporating an appreciation of Chinese culture within English language education, and assert that 'by the time students graduate from Junior High School and Senior High School... they should have a deepened understanding of Chinese culture'.

Furthermore, while these policies stress the need to teach cultural knowledge and raise students' awareness of the cultures of Anglophone countries, emphasis is also put on enhancing the competence of 'appreciating cultural difference'. We cannot, therefore, make the judgment that the anxiety about the 'spiritual pollution' associated with foreign cultures and languages has been entirely removed – contrasts between Chinese and other cultures are structurally built into the curriculum, thus promoting them as distinct entities. Nevertheless, the increased 'liberalization' of official thinking, along with the highlighting of the constructive and instrumental role which English can play in Chinese society and culture in the policies, may be another reason to explain why our research subjects are mostly optimistic about the influence of English.

We would also argue that the public discourse of 'English is not a threat' may be seen as an indicator of a successful process of cultural governance by the state. Cultural governance, in the academic tradition based on the writings of Gramsci (1971), is a form of hegemony exercised by the ruling class to make their ideas the most natural and dominant ones for their society, and in this way develop and maintain the consent of the population. Cultural power in this formulation is not exercised coercively, but done so routinely by means of consent. This pattern can, perhaps, apply to the way

that the state has been promoting the use of English in Chinese society in recent decades: the instrumental usefulness of English to the nation is placed very much at the forefront of the discourse, overshadowing any potential socio-cultural effects the language might have on the local language and culture. In this way, individuals, as products of power, perceive this concept of the language as legitimate and accept it as a resource that is 'for their own good' (Blommaert, 2008).

To summarize then, despite a discourse of *yingyu weixie* articulated by a number of notable scholars and commentators in recent years, it appears to be the case that English is not perceived as a threat to Chinese cultural identity by the majority of the research subjects in our study. This does not mean that English does not carry its own values and functions (or rather, those of the countries who control its regulation and education); nor does it mean that it does not affect local culture. Rather, it suggests that in China, the instrumental role of English is foregrounded both in policy and in the public imagination, for the purposes of economic development, modernization and internationalization. And while the policy discourse is broadly positive towards the use of English in China, it is worth noting that at the same time, Confucius Institutes and classrooms dedicated to the promotion and teaching of Chinese language and culture are being set up across the globe, with 554 institutions in more than 88 countries as of the end of 2009 (Hanban, 2010). So this extensive effort to promote the Chinese language and culture may be seen as an important measure to counterbalance the powerful cultural politics of the global spread of English, and shows that the 'hegemony of English' is often just one strand in a wider programme of global politics.

Acknowledgement

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