
The biggest English corner in China

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How the town of Yangshuo has become famous for educational tourism and English-language learning

Introduction

'They all speak good English. So how come they are jobless?' The Spring Festival Gala, broadcast alive on TV across China and among international Chinese communities, is one of the most popular and widely viewed performances for Chinese people on Chinese New Year's Eve. In a situational comedy at the 2012 Gala, one Chinese lady threw out the above remark to her friend with reference to the folk she had met in a foreign country she had just visited. The tone in which she said it was intended to invoke laughter at her sarcastic comment about the presumed almightiness of English. The audience, however, only reacted with a slightly audible mumble, which evidently reflected their ambivalence on this issue. After all, many in the audience – like the general population – are currently convinced that gaining a command of English is a very good thing, if not a national pursuit. To mock their pursuit of English is almost equal to mocking their view of life. This article takes a glimpse into this national craze towards English by presenting a brief ethnography of a new form of English learning in China: 'English educational tourism', that is, traveling for the purpose of learning English. By doing this, it explores the relationship between English and political economy, noting how English, the language of imperialism, at its current stage (re)produces new subjectivities among Chinese people as a semiotic form of modern/cosmopolitan imagination. Before outlining this argument and introducing the specific evidence upon which I base my claims, however, it is necessary to position this article with reference to previous theorizations relevant to the English language and the Chinese context.

Language and political economy

In the current context of globalization and late capitalism, the relationship between language and economy has received renewed interest in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. Generally speaking, two inter-related questions have been asked. First, how does the new economy bring about, or require, new functionality of language? Second, to what extent is language used in exchange for material gains? At the risk of providing sweeping answers, we can summarize the current research findings as 'linguicisation of the economy' (Pujolar, 2007: 73) and 'commodification of language' (Heller, 2003). On the one hand, with the tertiarization of the world economy (Duchêne and Heller, 2011), language and communication have become important aspects of work in this information age. On the other, we witness emerging public discourses which reframe



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language in its economic instead of demographic senses. In the case of the English language, however, the commodification of this language presents a more complicated picture for socio-historical and political reasons. The issue has been examined from various critical perspectives, most notably with Robert Phillipson's (1992) paradigm-shifting *Linguistic Imperialism*, which aroused keen debate. A glimpse into the literature suggests that perhaps no language evokes such enthusiastic or vehement labeling as the English language – 'the (an) international language', 'killer language', 'imperialist/capitalist language', 'lingua franca', 'a world language', 'a global language', or 'Englishes', with each term loaded with different sociopolitical implications. English has historically been associated with capitalist expansion or exploration after the Industrial Revolution in China (Bolton, 2002; Mok, 1974). However, in this age of late capitalism, power relations are demonstrated in ways different from the former colonial and neo-colonial discourses, because 'the national and imperial markets set up in previous centuries still operate, but they are re-framed as collaborative rather than hierarchical and as aimed at economic development and competition rather than at serving the national or the imperial center' (Heller, 2010: 103). Thus, 'in the neo-colonial project' the focus needs to be 'less on the language teaching and translation that was the hallmark of earlier forms of empire (although those remain) than on re-legitimizing those activities and constructing new subjectivities' (Heller, 2010: 106).

English as symbolic capital

China is definitely the largest English education market in the world (*The Independent*, 29 August, 2009). From kindergarten children to office workers, learning English is a national pursuit and practicing spoken English a national exercise. While no precise figure is available on how much China spends on learning English, news reports sometimes provide a glimpse of how lucrative the market is, and, according to some sources, the former English teacher Yu Minhong now boasts a personal fortune of some 121 million US dollars, as the founder of the famous English education chain of schools, the *New Oriental* chain (*Sohu*, 11 February, 2009).

While this enthusiastic pursuit of English can often be explained by the clichéd rhetoric of English as the language for international communication, English means much more than a lingua

franca. The gatekeeping function of English in China from primary education to professional promotion has made English a barometer of one's potential for future development, which means English not only filters out those 'unsuccessful' English learners from valuable opportunities, but stratifies Chinese people through the unequal distribution of social benefits based on one's English competence as they try to move up the social ladder. Thus while the national craze for English is always a topic of debate, leading Han Han, a social critic, to ask 我们 Chinese 总不能拿英语互相问路到长城怎么走吧? ['Shall we Chinese use English to ask each other which is the way to the Great Wall?'], English as a symbolic capital, loaded with (or promising) social prestige and benefits, cannot be easily deprived of its magic (Bourdieu, 1993).

In the national context of contemporary China, where English as a social stratifier is closely linked with social upward mobility and modernist imaginings, two observations can be made: first, the importance of English in personal development boosts the commodification of English and thus the industrialization of English education, contributing to the proliferation of private English education enterprises; second, for the very same reason, English has come to function as a stylistic resource indexing personal social status. This article seeks to illustrate these two points by introducing one case in which the English language has been appropriated to construct an English Corner as part of the local tourism economy, or so-called 'educational tourism', in Yangshuo County, southern China. This case thus (1) illuminates attempts at stretching the functionality of language in the new economy, and, more importantly, (2) indicates how English in its current stage of development has somehow retained its hegemonic power, but in a more covert form.

From rural neighborhood to English Corner: a brief history of Yangshuo

West Street (*Xi Jie*) used to be a small neighborhood in Yangshuo town, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southern China. Its existence can be traced back to the Song Dynasty, featuring Ming-Qing architecture style houses. It is named geographically after its location on the west bank of the famous Li River, which has long been acclaimed in historical Chinese literature as the 'top beauty under heaven'. Since the early 1980s, when tourism was revived as part of China's Open-up and Reform policy after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Yangshuo

started to attract foreign travelers because of its natural beauty, and the County gradually went through economic restructuring from the traditional agriculture to tourism industry. The special natural scenery of Karst mountains and rivers soon started to gain popularity as 'one of the destinations every backpacker has at least heard of before they set foot on China' (*China Lonely Planet*, 1998: 774). Meanwhile, West Street residents also started to run some small family business, like hotels and restaurants, catering to foreign travelers who disembarked on the street from their long journey on the River. Pretty soon, this little street with its convenient food and accommodation became a popular gathering place for backpackers after their exploration of the countryside and villages. As the tourism guidebook *Lonely Planet* notes, 'With its western-style cafes, Hollywood movies, Bob Marley tunes and banana pancakes, Yangshuo may not seem like the "real China", but who cares? It's a great spot to relax, see the scenery and grab a good cup of coffee – the perfect antidote to weeks or months on the road' (*China Lonely Planet*, 1998: 774).

As can be expected, the development of international tourism has made it necessary for the locals to know some English for business services. Most of them actually were able to pick up the language during their interaction with foreign travelers. However, while this use of English in tourism sites can be a quite commonplace observation among non-English speaking tourism sites, Yangshuo is actually quite special in its economic strategies during its later development. Since the early 1990s, as China's English education underwent privatization and marketization in this national craze towards English mentioned earlier, learning English has become more of a personal investment instead of just being a school subject. Under this national ideological environment, Yangshuo with its large number of international tourists and English-speaking locals started a process of re-positioning, transforming and integrating itself into the larger English market. Thus from the late 1990s, the instrumental function of the English language as a tool of communication with international tourists started to be reframed in a more pragmatic sense by utilizing it for constructing an 'English Corner' in China. One popular joke widely circulating there helps testify to some extent how such a presumably authentic English learning environment could possibly improve one's English competence significantly:

It is said that, in the midnight, Bush in the bed saw Laden standing seriously in front of him, he made a

breath deeply and said 'Laden, How dare you are! How can you be so bold to crash into the White House now?' Laden answered in real American English, 'Because I have been to Xijie Street of Yangshuo, I am confident.' (Bigtomato, 2007: 161).

In 1998 the first English Summer Camp was initiated as a strategy to attract Chinese tourists as English learners. Its fame as an English Corner, however, only started to be established when *Crazy English*, an already famous English teaching and training brand nationally, joined in the organization of the Summer Camp the next year. The Camp was supposed to be a collective English learning activity during the summer holiday, aimed at Chinese people from all over China. It needs to be mentioned that as a private English education brand in China, *Crazy English* is fairly unusual, and actually popular, in its teaching philosophy by encouraging students to speak, if not shout, English without the fear of losing face (see Bolton, 2003). The publicity drive with *Crazy English* thus helped Yangshuo gain its fame overnight as the largest English Corner in China, attracting thousands of English learners from all over China.

During the English Summer Camp of 1999, students were encouraged to practice English by seizing every interactional opportunity: the local restaurants, bars, cafés frequented by foreign travelers were put to their fullest use, promoted as places where people could practice their English in an authentic setting. It was seen that language education could be a profitable enterprise, and the local government started to support the industrialization of English education on a larger scale as an important part of the local tourism economy. The so-called 'education tourism' thus became a new tourism attraction, targeted at middle class Chinese with a tuition fee far beyond the average income of the local residents. English-language learning actually became such a profitable industry that by 2003 there were 26 foreign language schools in the area. Statistics show that, from 2004 to 2009, Yangshuo attracted a total of more than 50,000 English learners, along with whom came more than 200,000 friends and relatives as tourists (Jiang, 2009: 59). What differentiates Yangshuo from other English learning environments is its emphasis on developing communicative competence in a presumably authentic learning environment, facilitated by English-speaking locals, international tourists, western cafés and bars, as well as a



Figure 1. Geographical location of Yangshuo County, Guilin City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, P. R. China (Accessed from Google Maps, June 7, 2012)

locally-organized Christmas Party and Beer Festival every year.

English educational tourism

As indicated earlier, one important factor in authentic English learning as promoted is the opportunity to speak with foreigners. Thus one way in which the schools attract students is to recruit tourists as foreign teachers, as illustrated by Figure 2. In contrast to many other job advertisements, teaching positions are usually advertised in a popular location for tourists, or in some

popular travel websites like *Couchsurfing*. For foreign travelers, teaching at Yangshuo can be a convenient choice for free accommodation and meals, visa extension, and in some cases extra money. It is noticeable that native speakers from Inner Circle countries (Kachru, 1986) are the preferred teachers, though foreign tourists from outer circles are also considered on a case-by-case basis.

As to pedagogical practices, while there must be specific variations at different schools, all the schools actually hold a similar teaching philosophy by promoting interaction with foreigners as an



Figure 2. A school recruitment advertisement on the street (Photo courtesy Shuang Gao)



Figure 3. 'Success in English, Success in Life'. Photo by Gao Shuang ©

effective learning strategy. Thus in their advertisement to potential students, this interactional opportunity is emphasized:

Yangshuo boasts to be the largest English corner in China. There are large numbers of foreigners and more than 500 are now living here. The college has been making full use of this ideal linguistic environment ever since its establishment. Our teaching is guided by a nice teaching philosophy combining theory and practice. We encourage students to practice what they learn in the classroom with foreigners from all over the world, anytime, anywhere. The progress can be very obvious. (Translated from Chinese as in one local school's website)

The importance of English is justified by a short yet quite striking slogan right on the school's front window, which says 'Success in English, Success in Life', reflecting the Chinese mentality which links English to a promise of upward social mobility (Figure 3).

Actually, at the school district of Yangshuo, where quite a number of English language schools are located, huge eye-catching slogans are painted on the wall alongside the streets, for example, 'Enjoy speaking English all the time' (as in Figure 4); 'You're always stronger than you think, remember to stand tall and never lose confidence'. These slogans not only help reproduce an



Figure 4. 'Enjoy speaking English all the time'. Photo by Gao Shuang ©

image of an English-speaking town, but also to some extent encourage participation.

Thus Chinese tourists, even those not registered at local schools, actually help live up to the reputation of Yangshuo as a large English Corner by trying to strike up an English conversation with foreign travelers they happen to meet on the street. During the summer season in particular, it is quite easy to spot a group of Chinese people approaching foreigners in order to talk in English, as shown in Figure 5.

Mama Moon: A language celebrity

The image of English Corner is further strengthened by constructing what can be called a 'language celebrity'. A local woman in her 60s, nicknamed Mama Moon, has been made an icon of an English-speaking Yangshuo. Various media, locally and nationally, have reported on her achievement in learning English, and her competence in the language was also used to valorize the effectiveness of the English Corner, so that even less educated grannies from rural villages could successfully master the language. Her photo has even appeared in one local school's advertisement to help promote its courses, as shown in Figure 6.

This projected image has great appeal for Chinese tourists, who treat Mama Moon as a celebrity and are eager to meet her, as shown in the following story about her that was recently published on the Internet:



Figure 5. Talking with foreigners in the street



Figure 6. Mama Moon

If you are already at Yangshuo, you cannot miss West Street [...]. Our tour guide told me, when you walk on the street, you can even encounter a countryside grandma speaking standard American English. But don't you be surprised, because aside from the local dialect, English is another daily language [...]. A foreign couple was bargaining with a local old man over a craft. It seemed that the price was too high that the foreigners walked away while still negotiating the price. The old man, however, was not in a hurry. He just saw them off and smiled with 'OK'. This old man does not look different from those old men in my hometown, but can do international business just in front of his own house. This is really admirable. 'At West Street, if you can't speak English, you appear dumb.' (Translated from Chen, 2008)

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that the national pursuit of English in China has contributed to the formation of an English Corner as part of the local tourism economy, that is, English educational tourism. This new form of English learning and practicing indicates that the English language fever in China has penetrated deep into the Chinese conception of authentic English learning and imagination of modernity. So-called English educational tourism thus is not only about the spread of an imperial/international language, but is closely linked to the modernist imagination of Chinese people. In this sense, the current political economy of English is less about capitalist exploitation in a

centre-periphery paradigm, but more about English as a semiotic form of cultural hegemony that has its roots in the Chinese subjectivity in terms of the symbolic meanings of English (social prestige) and its promise of social upward mobility. The English Corner thus perpetuates English as a social stratifier wherein English has attained new hegemonic power in China as a middle-class stylistic resource being actively pursued, at economic and cultural cost.

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