

*China and English. Globalization and the dilemmas of identity.*

Lo Bianco, Joseph, Orton, Jane, and Yihong, Gao (eds.) (2009), *Multilingual Matters*.

Reviewed by Prof. David C.S. Li for *World Englishes*

The Hong Kong Institute of Education

1 May 2011

This edited volume is a valuable contribution to the changing role and status of English in the national curriculum in China and its implications on Chinese learners and users' identity in the process of harnessing and using English. Following the gradual emergence of China as a major player in world politics and economics in the last three decades, the needs for English in the most populous country on earth is also undergoing a shift, from being an object of study (i.e. as a school subject) in the national curriculum from primary to tertiary to being a medium of instruction of some disciplines in university-level education. Part of this shift is reflected in the design of government-approved English language textbooks from the 1980s to the first decade of this millennium (see Chapter 6, "'Just a tool': The role of English in the curriculum' by Jane Orton). With the largest number of learners and users of English amounting to hundreds of millions, the use of English in China as a medium of instruction in some disciplines, especially the 'hard' sciences, is widely perceived as necessary and instrumental for facilitating as well as accelerating the Chinese intelligentsia's grasp of intellectually demanding know-how in their respective research areas. This would enable the linguistically more adept scholars to keep abreast with global cutting-edge developments in their specialized disciplines.

The book consists of five parts and 16 chapters. The first three chapters in Part 1, 'Western dreams, Chinese quests – habitus and encounter', are written each by one of the co-editors. They define the scope of and provide the conceptual basis for the rest of the contributions in this volume. Parts 2-3 each consists of four chapters, featuring 'Learners, identities and purposes' (Part 2) and 'Landscapes and mindscapes' (Part 3). Part 4 is devoted to three studies of 'Narratives', while the last two chapters in Part 5, 'English for China in the world' each report on the analysis of data collected for a survey on teachers' judgments of the penetration of English into the Chinese education system in China.

The substance of the book grew out of deep and decade-long collaboration between scholars, notably the three co-editors, in two leading universities in their respective countries: Peking University of China, and Melbourne University of Australia. The bulk of the book's content has been reported and deliberated in front of wider audiences at jointly organized conferences and symposia.

The keyword and main thread that infuses the entire volume is 'identity', which is examined and analyzed from multiple perspectives, including historically from China's own point of view. The background to the *ti-yong* dichotomy (Western learning as utility – Chinese language as essence) proposed by the late Qing official Zhang Zhidong (p.60), is particularly instructive and informative. The discussion goes back to the twilight years of Imperial China under the last Qing Emperor, when traditional scholars clinging to Confucian virtues were scrambling to identify workable means to save China and its peoples from the many daunting socio-political perils, including education. The *ti-yong* dichotomy was held to be a feasible solution, allowing Chinese students of western know-how to harness advanced western ideas, technologies and their sundry applications, putatively keeping their (traditional) Chinese identity intact in the process. Such a culturally conditioned stance has proved too difficult to follow in practice. As Jane Orton puts it toward the end of Chapter 3, 'English and the Chinese quest':

The contradiction at heart between Chinese ethics and teaching and Western technical know-how was clear to the 19th-century Chinese reformers. Yet they believed that both could be learned in relative harmony by one [and the same] person. What they only gradually came to realise was that the technical expertise they sought was not simply the result of knowledge of a neutral physics, but the active manifestation of a system of basic beliefs and values that was in part at odds with, even antagonistic to, their own. (p.94)

Gao Yihong echoes the same contradiction and dilemma in the conclusion of Chapter 2, 'Sociocultural contexts and English in China: Retaining and reforming the cultural habitus' as follows:

The Confucian habitus of learning embraced the tension between external and internal functions of learning. Throughout history, this tension has

been retained and manifested in the field of ELT as a *ti-yong* dilemma, and for individual learners, as cultural identity conflicts. Such dilemmas are intensified in contemporary China, as the needs for English skills increases with economic growth. (p. 74)

The historically grounded approach, particularly in the chapters in Part I, is especially enlightening in view of China's gradual emergence as a major player in the world, politically as much as economically. The more globalization takes root and increasingly manifests as glocalization, the more dependent Chinese people are on English, the carrier – albeit disputed – of cutting-edge knowledge and often the preferred lingua franca for speakers from different first-language backgrounds.

Being rich and well conceived, this book has a lot to offer, touching upon a variety of related sub-themes: relations between China and Western societies, legitimacy of identity research, language pedagogy, teacher identity, and bilingual education. More specific topics by chapter are as follows: debate on the legitimacy of language and identity research in China (Gao, Ch. 4), comparison and contrast of cross-cultural identity construction (Z. Li, Ch. 5), contrastive analysis of English language textbooks in the early 1980s and early years of the new millennium (Orton, Ch. 6), longitudinal study of Chinese college students' English learning motivation and self-identity changes (Bian, Ch. 7), ethnic identification and correlations between ethnic minority groups and their languages (Zhou, Ch. 8), glocalization as a consequence of minority groups' exposure to bilingual education that includes their local language, Putonghua and English (Xu, Ch. 9), "English at home in China" as a result of the national language-in-education policy that embraces English, including as medium of instruction at tertiary level (p.199, Lo Bianco, Ch. 10), the appeal of 'Crazy English' and how the idea of an "imagined community" helps sustain the learner's learning motivation (J. Li, Ch. 11), narrative studies through discourse analysis (Z. Li, Ch. 12; Y. Li, Ch. 13; Y. Liu, Ch. 14), and two studies based on a survey of teachers' judgments regarding the increasingly marked presence of English in the national curriculum (Orton, Ch. 15; Lo Bianco, Ch. 16).

In a work of over 300 pages, minor editing problems are understandable, but the number of inaccuracies seems to be on the high side. For example, in the two concluding chapters, the English translation of the *Hanban* is variously rendered as "the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language"

(p.288) and “the National Office of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOCFLL)” (p.296). Inconsistency is also found in the description of the survey questions and the analysis of survey results. Thus at the bottom of p.273 in chapter 15, under ‘Views’, respondents were asked to complete two sentences beginning with “(1) the best thing(s) about the growth of English regard in China is...” followed by “(2) the worst thing(s) about the growth of English learning in China is...”. In the analysis in chapter 16, under the heading ‘Responses’ on p.301, the reader is told that “The first question asked about the worst aspects associated with the growth of English learning in China” (emphasis added). Similarly, in Chapter 15, under ‘Profile of respondents’, the institutions are listed by type, of which “universities dedicated to the teaching of *Languages and cultures*” is one of the five main types (p.273). However, in Table 15.1 ‘Respondents by institution type’, this institution type is referred to as ‘Language’ *tout court* (p.274). Elsewhere, the in-text analysis does not always agree with the statistics presented in tables. Thus in the section ‘Educational benefits’ in Chapter 15, it is stated that:

A total of 12 respondents, making up 8% of the group, went further than advocacy of international exchange, suggesting that knowing English would allow China to spread its language and culture in the world. (p.276)

Yet in Table 15.5 ‘Q1 – theme 2 – educational benefits’ on top of the page, the figure for ‘Beneficiary – World’ (as opposed to ‘Beneficiary – Students’ and ‘Beneficiary – Nation’) in the column ‘% of total Q1 responses (N = 200)’ is listed as “6” (p.276).

More eye-catching editing problems may be found in the tables in Chapter 2 (see Table 2.1, pp. 61-62), notably the references to the two Opium Wars under ‘Historical Background’ (p. 61), and “China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1995” (presumably 1895, p.60). Editing problems such as these will hopefully be rectified in a new edition or print run.

Gao Yihong notes that in ancient China, “One issue that Confucius and his contemporaries did not have to worry about was the learning of languages other than the native. It has been left for generations of their descendents to respond to the potential threat to the integrity of Chinese identity posed by the rituals embedded in another language” (p.59). From the *ti-yong* dichotomy to the imagined community of English users, readers who have an interest in the

impact of English in China from late nineteenth century to the present will find in this volume a useful reference.