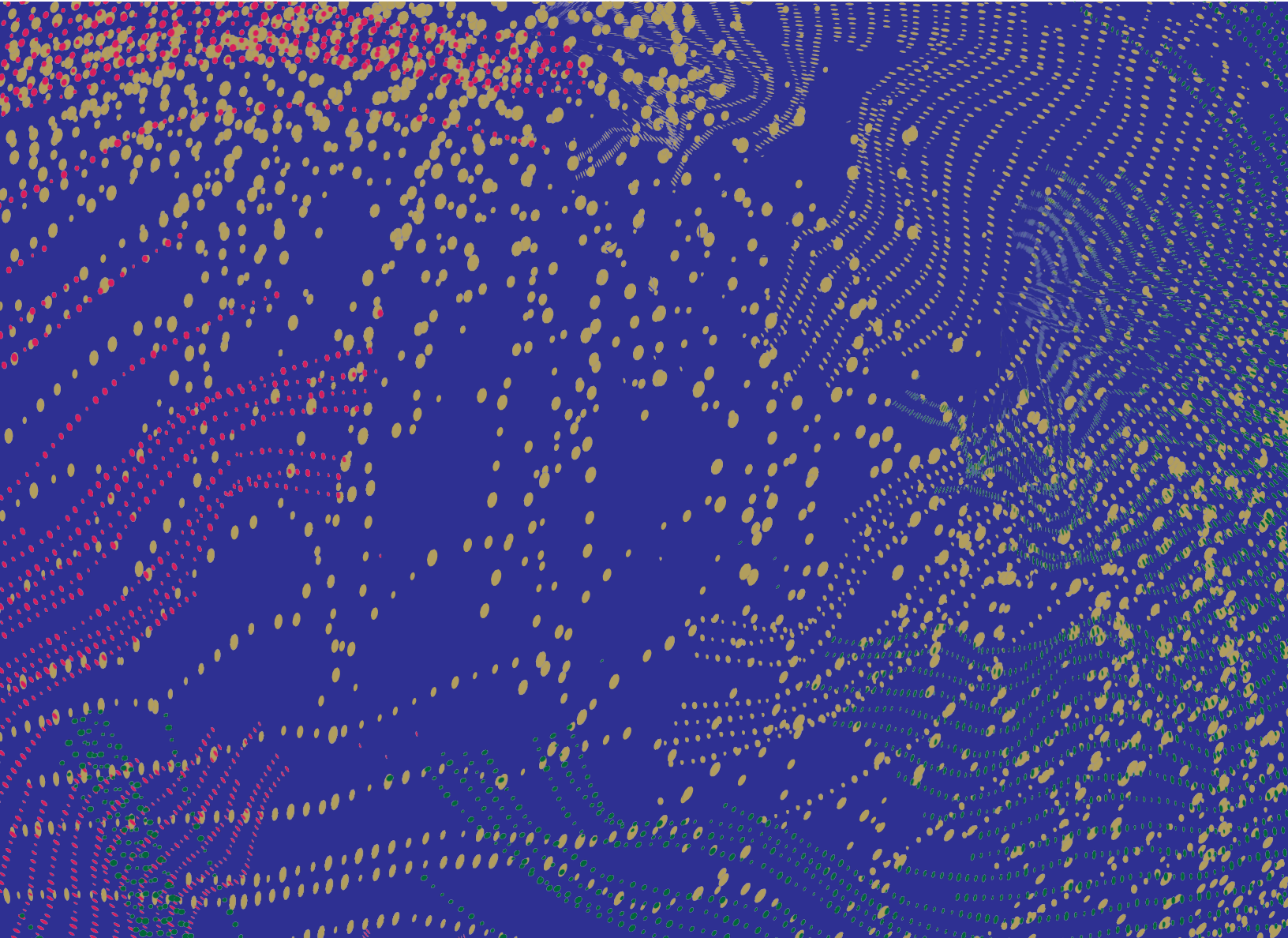


The World Humanities Report

# The Expansion of Foreign Language Education in China

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Wang Shouren



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# The Expansion of Foreign Language Education in China

Wang Shouren Nanjing University

In 1978 China began to implement the policy of reform and opening up that has brought about great changes in China's political, economic, and social landscape. Reform and opening up propelled foreign language education, and vice versa. The forty or so years since the start of reform and opening up have been a period of rapid development of foreign language education in China. Particularly in the past three decades, as China has insisted on opening its doors and has been transforming from a "nativist country" into an international one, foreign language education has taken the initiative to adapt to new conditions and development needs.

Foreign language education in China has gradually moved from elite education to mass education, with universities, secondary schools, and primary schools all attaching great importance to foreign language teaching and learning. Approximately 300 million people are currently learning foreign languages in China. The Ministry of Education's Compulsory Education Curriculum Program stipulates that foreign languages are the national curriculum for compulsory education, starting in the third grade, with English courses being offered as early as the first grade in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. In September 2014 the Implementation Opinion of the State Council on Deepening the Reform of the Examination and Enrollment System specified that Chinese, mathematics, and foreign languages would all be standardized subjects for college entrance examination with the same scores (150 points). At present, there are 36.59 million undergraduates and 3.65 million graduate students in colleges and universities nationwide. Because foreign language is part of the core curriculum that all students are required to take, China has become the world's largest foreign language learning country.

Professionalized foreign language education in colleges and universities seeks to improve the quality of instruction and to cultivate talent. The academic research and training of foreign language majors in colleges and universities

play a significant role in determining the quality of foreign language education in China. China has seven higher education institutions dedicated to foreign language education, including Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) and Shanghai International Studies University (SISU). In addition, various comprehensive universities and universities of science and technology also have foreign language majors, among which English has the largest number of students, with more than one thousand institutions of higher learning offering BA programs in English. In 2017 the Ministry of Education (MOE) officially launched the World-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines Construction initiative, and the discipline of foreign languages and literature at Peking University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Shanghai International Studies University, and Nanjing University has received special funding from the government. The foreign languages departments at these universities have been implementing the First-Class Disciplines project with an eye on two requirements: world class and Chinese characteristics. The former refers to benchmarking with top universities in the world and making high-quality and original contributions in important fields of academic research, and the latter means serving the national development strategy and being “rooted in Chinese soil.”

At the level of graduate education, the first-level discipline of foreign languages and literature has been adjusted from the original thirteen secondary disciplines (based on different languages) to five major disciplinary research directions: foreign literature, foreign linguistics and applied linguistics, translation studies, comparative literature and transcultural studies, and country and area studies. This reorganization has created a new landscape of translingual, transnational, and interdisciplinary approaches. At the level of undergraduate education, the National Standards of Teaching Quality for Undergraduate Foreign Language and Literature Majors, released in 2018, sets out the criteria for quality, knowledge, and ability for talent cultivation.

Taking the Chinese context as its starting point, Nanjing University redefined the following as essential for foreign language majors: intercultural competences (understood as intercultural knowledge at the cognitive level), language integration at the functional level, creativity and initiative at the behavioral level, and a sense of responsibility and discernment in intercultural communication. This teaching reform project, which was awarded the first prize of national teaching achievements in 2018, explores how to cultivate the intercultural competences of foreign language majors with Chinese characteristics by optimizing the curriculum system and introducing Chinese elements

into the content of foreign language instruction; extending language skills training to the mastery of discourse modes; integrating Chinese and foreign languages, cultures, and ideas; and combining various educational approaches and methods.

Reforms of foreign language instruction in universities have also been implemented, especially the reform of teaching of English. These reforms cover syllabus creation, curriculum development, teaching assessment, and teaching methods and strategies, and they have improved the quality of teaching. In October 2020 the National College Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board under the MOE issued a document, *College English Teaching Guidelines for Teaching English in Universities*, which specifies the objectives of teaching English in universities: “to cultivate students’ English application ability; enhance their intercultural communication awareness and skills; develop their independent learning ability, improve their comprehensive cultural literacy; cultivate their humanistic spirit and critical thinking ability; cultivate students’ ability to use English effectively in their study, life, and future career; and to meet the needs of the country, society, universities, and personal development.” According to the guidelines, university-level teaching of English should be divided into three levels (basic, advanced, and developmental) with three categories of courses (general English, English for specific purposes, and intercultural communication). The purpose of the reform of English teaching at universities is to improve students’ ability to use English—to express their thoughts and feelings accurately and appropriately in English in general social situations; to participate in discussions and debates; to tell their own stories and those of China; to explain Chinese characteristics and positions; to be able to communicate in English in professional situations; to make their voices heard in their fields of study, so that future scientists, engineers, economists, legal experts, and humanities scholars can excel professionally.

In order to strengthen the top-level design and overall planning of foreign language education in China, the government has proposed the establishment of a foreign language proficiency assessment system, with the aim of providing foreign language teaching at all levels with clear objectives and scientific testing and evaluation standards. The main tasks of the system include the development of the China’s Standards of English Language Ability (CSE) and the National English Test System (NETS), which were officially released by the Ministry of Education and the State Language Commission in 2018. CSE is based on China’s national conditions and provides a comprehensive description of

language proficiency of English learners and users in China, classifying them into three stages—“beginners,” “intermediate users,” and “advanced users,” with a total of nine levels. CSE is oriented to language use and has a multilevel indicator system that provides a comprehensive, clear, and detailed description of the characteristics of each level of proficiency. As China’s first comprehensive English proficiency assessment standard, CSE helps to solve the problems of different standards of English examinations and inconsistent English teaching and testing objectives in China. It makes the test design more comprehensive and systematic, renders test results comparable, promotes the communication and mutual recognition of different learning outcomes, and plays the role of “measuring equivalence.” CSE also provides a basis for the development of various types of English tests at the national level, guidance and technical reference for the development of various standards for teaching English, and the revision of curriculum in schools. It also provides a yardstick for determining the level of language proficiency in the development of various teaching materials.

The popularity of foreign language education in China is mainly in the field of English education, which is determined by the importance of English itself. English is widely used in political, economic, scientific and technological, and cultural activities throughout the world today and will remain a *lingua franca* of international communication for the foreseeable future. In recent years, however, education in other languages has also made great progress as the country adapts to the global changes and the requirements of reform and opening up. In particular, the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative has led to a shift in foreign language education from the monolingualism of English to multilingualism. In addition to English, the national curriculum for compulsory education now includes Russian and Japanese, and the latest senior high school curriculum has added German, French, and Spanish. Universities are actively developing multiple foreign languages programs, offering second and third foreign language courses “after” English, and cultivating students who are “highly proficient in one foreign language and can communicate in multiple foreign languages” or who can “master one particular subject and can communicate in multiple foreign languages.” In 2016 the MOE issued the Action Plan for Jointly Advancing the Belt and Road Education Initiative, which proposed language education exchanges aiming to “gradually incorporate language courses of countries along the Belt and Road into the school education curriculum of each country.” There are nearly fifty national languages involved in the Belt and Road Initiative. In order to serve the national development strategy, Beijing



Foreign Studies University has opened more than one hundred foreign language majors, covering the official languages of all countries involved.

Foreign language education has a special role and status in strengthening international exchanges, spreading Chinese culture throughout the world, promoting mutual learning with other civilizations, and building a human community with a shared future. Foreign language learning can have a profound impact on people's knowledge structure, way of thinking, and comparative perspectives. In the twenty-first century China has become much more open to the outside world, and the new era calls for high-quality foreign language education. Foreign language education has made remarkable achievements in exploring teaching practices suitable for China's national conditions, and theoretical research on foreign language education has also made breakthroughs.

A number of scholars are actively exploring and trying to build original theories of foreign language teaching. Wang Chuming of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies has explored the essential mechanism of language learning and put forward the *xu*-theory: language is acquired through *xu*, a Chinese word with a composite meaning of completion, extension, and creation, and high efficiency in learning a language is achieved by *xu*. His findings have been adopted by the college entrance examinations and related articles have been published in international journals, attracting attention from foreign scholars. Wen Qiufang of Beijing Foreign Studies University has proposed a theoretical system with Chinese characteristics called the production-oriented approach (POA). This approach consists of three components: teaching principles of "learning-centered," "learning-using integration," and "the-whole person education"; teaching hypotheses of "output-driven," "input-enabled," and "selective learning"; and teaching processes of motivating, enabling, and assessing. Foreign language teachers' research on foreign literature and culture has continued to deepen, and Shen Dan of Peking University and Nie Zhenzhao of Zhejiang University have devoted themselves to the dissemination of their scholarship on narratology and ethical literary criticism among the international academic community.

However, on the whole, the development of foreign languages and literature discipline still needs to improve. Compared with other humanities disciplines, the research foundation is not strong enough, and there are not many influential landmark achievements. For historical reasons, the small number of doctoral programs has resulted in too few highly skilled graduates and a

relatively low level of education among the faculty, which has restricted career development. The integration with the major needs of national economic and social development is not deep enough and lacks momentum and vitality. Foreign language education is large in scale and not particularly efficient. In addition, many humanities scholars do not have strong English-language writing skills, so they cannot effectively carry out international academic exchanges and make their voices heard. Faced with the global changes of a magnitude not seen in a century, Chinese foreign language education should take effective measures to meet these challenges in order to further improve the quality of education, seize the opportunities brought by the new technological revolution, promote the integration of technology and the humanities, and to innovate, develop, and strengthen national foreign language education.

*Translated from the Chinese*



**Wang Shouren** is University Distinguished Professor and Director of Center for Teaching and Learning at Nanjing University. His research covers British and American literature, as well as English-language education in China. His publications include *The Theatre of the Mind* (1990), *A Report on the Development of Foreign Language Teaching in China's Universities* (2008), and the four-volume *Post-WWII World History and the Development of Foreign Literature* (2019).