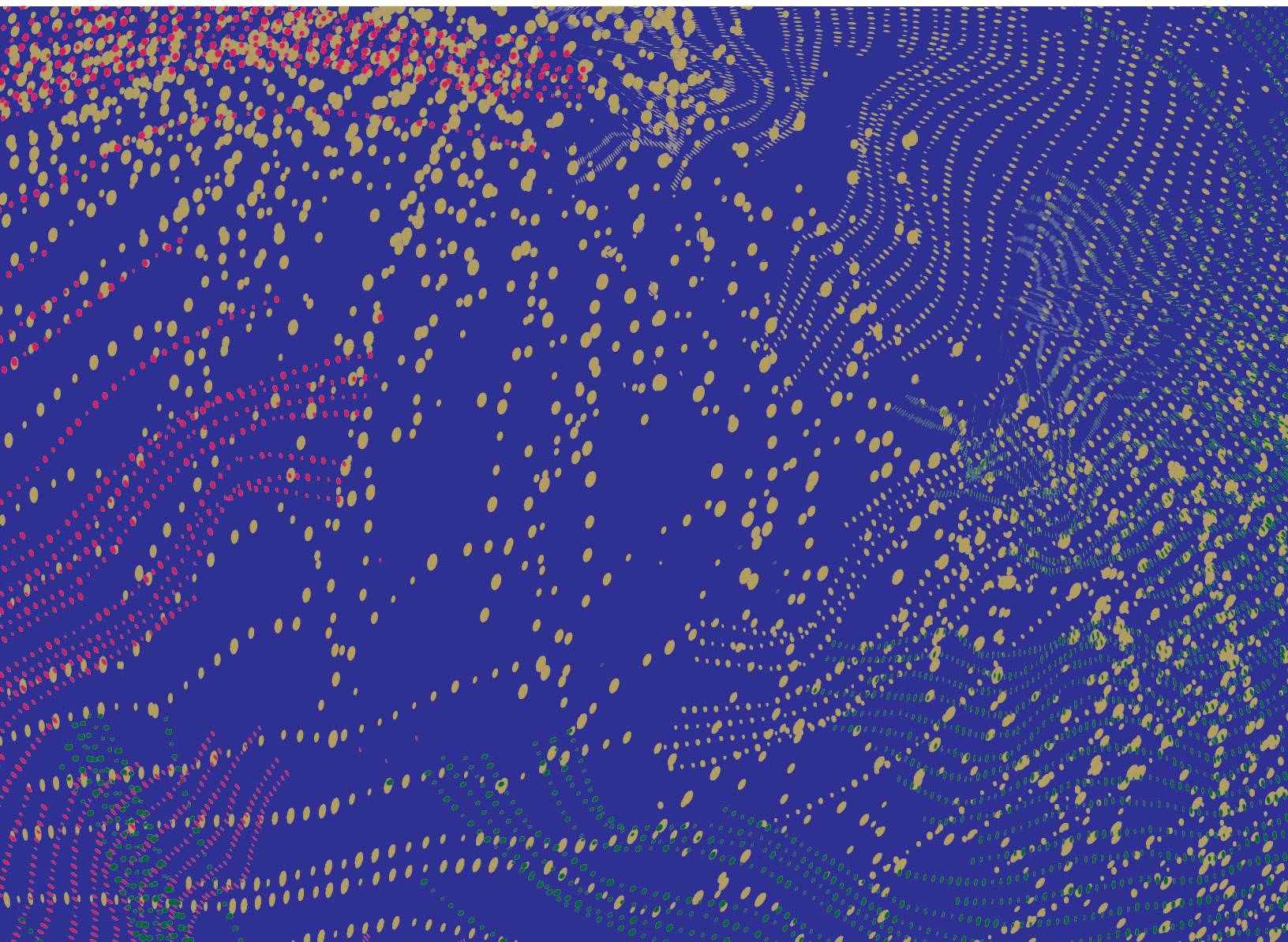


The World Humanities Report
**Education in and
Development of Less
Commonly Taught
Languages in China**

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Education in and Development of Less Commonly Taught Languages in China

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Generally speaking, the six working languages of the United Nations—Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish—are considered to be commonly taught languages, and any other languages are considered to be less commonly taught. As early as 1862, the Qing government established the Tongwenguan, a government school for learning Western languages, which started modern foreign language education in China. In 1942, the Republican government established the National Oriental Language College in Kunming, which offered education of eight languages, including Hindi, Burmese, and Malay.¹ However, it is not after the founding of the New China that education of less commonly taught languages began to develop more fully. For example, the Seven-Year Plan for Foreign Language Education issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council in 1964 emphasized the adjustment of foreign language programs in tertiary and secondary schools, so that the number of students studying less commonly taught languages could reach a certain percentage. Beyond higher education, the Ministry of Education issued *Several Opinions on Running Good Foreign Language Schools* in 1979, which proposed to offer six languages in the elementary curriculum: English, Russian, Japanese, French, German, and Spanish. In 2001, the Ministry of Education issued the *Notice on Approving Peking University and Other Higher Education Institutions to Establish Undergraduate Talent Training Bases for Foreign Languages in Less Commonly Taught Languages and Issuing Funds for the Construction of Bases and the Reply to the Establishment of Undergraduate Training Bases for Less Commonly Taught Language*

¹ Ding Chao, “The Past and Present Life of Less Commonly Taught Languages in China” [in Chinese], *Shenzhou Scholars*, no. 1 (2016): 6–11.

Talents at the Institute of Foreign Languages and the Institute of International Relations of the People's Liberation Army, among other documents. Since then, education of less commonly taught languages has developed rapidly. Major developments in this area began in the twenty-first century, especially with the opportunities that have been brought by the Belt and Road Initiative. In 2015, the Ministry of Education issued the Views on the Implementation of Strengthening the Cultivation of Less Commonly Taught Language Talents in Foreign Languages, emphasizing the accelerated cultivation of a group of application- and discipline-focused specialists in less commonly taught languages who hold an international perspective, are well-versed in international regulations, and can participate in international affairs and international competition.

Features of the Development of Less Commonly Taught Language Education

Since entering the new century, China's less commonly taught language education has seen a rapid development of language professionals. The implementation of the Belt and Road first requires personnel with language skills. Accelerating the training in less commonly taught languages is an essential requirement for deepening the comprehensive reform of higher education and for improving the quality of training, and constitutes an urgent need to implement the strategy of opening up to the outside world, especially in response to the Belt and Road Initiative, to defend national sovereignty and security, and to safeguard the interests of national economic development. With national strategies in mind, Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) has been approved to offer the teaching of 101 foreign languages, and the official languages of all the countries with which China has diplomatic relations are now available. At present, BFSU's European and Asian-African language clusters are the largest bases of less commonly taught languages in China.

The expanded teaching of less commonly taught languages in China demands a gradual, planned, and purposeful opening. For example, fourteen language majors including Tajik and Kurdish were opened in 2015, twelve language majors including Fijian and Māori were opened in 2016, and twelve language majors including Dari and Niuean were supported for opening in 2017. This has gradually achieved full coverage of official languages from countries with established diplomatic relationships.

Deepening the Reform of the Enrollment System and Talent Training System for Less Commonly Taught Language Education

The training of talents in less commonly taught languages is an important part of enhancing our national language capacity. In recent years, to ensure the demand for training talents in less commonly taught language majors, the Ministry of Education has continuously pushed relevant provinces, departments, and universities to dynamically adjust and optimize the enrollment structure, reasonably compile enrollment plans by major, and pilot a reform of the enrollment system for less commonly taught language majors in some universities. For example, Beijing Foreign Studies University has implemented the Belt and Road Initiative's foreign language major comprehensive evaluation enrollment mechanism, which focuses on selecting students with outstanding foreign language learning abilities, as well as strong interest in the specific region and its international political, economic, and cultural development trends, and especially encourages multilingual candidates to apply. Candidates who pass the aptitude test will have their college entrance examination score and aptitude test score comprehensively evaluated, based on their full scores obtained from the local college entrance examination – in a ratio of seven to three.

The innovation of this talent cultivation mechanism is also an important feature of the development of less commonly taught language education in recent years. Through cross-cultivation within the university, the universities concerned have removed the barriers between faculties and majors, focused on improving students' comprehensive application ability, and established an innovative mechanism of cultivating “commonly taught language + less commonly taught language” talents. The language courses are to be based on language genealogy so as to strengthen the “gravitational pull” of commonly taught languages. By increasing the number of students enrolled in the main regional commonly taught language, we encourage them to minor in similar less commonly taught languages, which vigorously cultivates “general language + less commonly taught language” multilingual talents. This is a way to save and integrate resources and avoid duplication. For example, the School of Russian at BFSU has adopted the “Russian + East Slavic and Central Asian languages” model to train multilingual talents in Russian and Ukrainian, Kazakh, Uzbek, Tajik, and Turkmen. Experience has proved that according to the above-mentioned training model, it is feasible to achieve a reasonable allocation of teachers among similar languages. For example, in the past, BFSU teachers

of Czech and Serbian have also been able to teach Slovak and Croatian.²

Strengthening international joint training, expanding the number and professional range of students of less commonly taught language who are sent to study abroad, establishing overseas teaching centers for less commonly taught language in target countries, and establishing joint training mechanisms between domestic universities and well-known universities in target countries, are also important initiatives for the cultivation of less commonly taught language talents. For example, when Premier Li Keqiang visited Greece in 2014, China did not have Greek interpreters who could meet the requirements on the ground, and direct interpretation between Chinese and Greek was not possible, so they had to communicate through English intermediary interpretation. For this reason, the China Scholarship Council later implemented the Greek language training program approved by Premier Li Keqiang and sent seventy students to study in Greece in 2015, including twenty-seven students and faculty members of the pilot project of comprehensive reform of Greek language at Beihang University.³ In addition, in recent years, in order to strengthen national and regional studies, especially studies related to the Belt and Road Initiative, to accelerate the training of national and regional research talents with international vision, knowledge of international rules, and the ability to participate in international affairs and competition, and to better serve the national diplomatic strategy and the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative, the China Scholarship Council has increased its efforts to send the national and regional research talents to study abroad through the International Regional Studies and Foreign Language High-Level Talent Training Program for several years.

Establishing the Steering Committee on the Teaching Methodology of Less Commonly Taught Language Majors and Deepening the Research on Teaching of Foreign Language Majors

In 2002, the Ministry of Education issued the Notice on the Establishment of the Steering Committee on Teaching Methodology of Foreign Language

² Zhang Tianwei, “The Construction of Less Commonly Taught Languages Requires a Comprehensive Layout” [in Chinese], *Guangming Daily*, June 14, 2017.

³ Zhang Tianwei, “Less Commonly Taught Language Education in China from the Perspective of National Language Proficiency: Problems and Countermeasures” [in Chinese], *Foreign Language World*, no. 2 (2017): 44–52.

Majors and Other Subjects in Higher Education Institutions of the Ministry of Education from 2002 to 2006, which referenced English, Japanese, Russian, German, and less commonly taught languages. The steering committee for less commonly taught language teaching works on developing experts, creating teaching material, teaching reform, and the formulation of professional norms and teaching quality standards, which greatly promotes the development of less commonly taught language teaching in China. For example, in 2017 the China Less Commonly Taught Language Teaching and Research Association first published the first “Report on the Construction and Development of Less Commonly Taught Language Expertise in Foreign Languages in China” and organized the selection activities of the 4th China Less Commonly Taught Language Education Award and Excellence in Scientific Research Achievement Award. In 2015 the China Less Commonly Taught Language Teaching and Research Association organized the selection of the 5th China Foreign Language Less Commonly Taught Language Excellence in Scientific Research Achievement Award, all of which has greatly promoted the development of less commonly taught language teaching and research in China. In addition, in order to record the history of the development of foreign language education in China and to show the current situation and characteristics of the development of less commonly taught language education, Wen Qiufang and Wang Wenbin, both professors at Beijing Foreign Studies University, have led the preparation of the “Annual Report on Foreign Language Education in China” since 2011, which also introduces and compares the current development status and effectiveness of less commonly taught language education in China over the years, analyzes the existing problems, and summarizes the development experience.

Consolidating Traditional Research and Focusing on Cross-Disciplinary Research

In recent years, with the in-depth promotion of the National Social Science Foundation’s Special Project for Research on Neglected Fields of Scholarship, China’s less commonly taught language education has focused on the construction and development of cross-disciplinary fields such as national and regional studies, while the traditional studies of linguistics, literature, and translation have continued to deepen. In 2018 the National Standards for Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Professional Classes in General Higher Education Institutions were promulgated and placed the disciplinary basis of national and regional

studies within foreign language and literature programs. In this context, some institutions with better development of less commonly taught language majors have vigorously promoted the cultivation of national and regional talents, such as Beijing Language and Literature University and Peking University, which established the second-level discipline of national and regional studies under the framework of the first-level discipline of foreign language and literature; Shanghai International Studies University established the second-level disciplines of regional national studies and regional studies under the first-level discipline of political science; Beijing Foreign Studies University has established the Institute for Advanced Studies in Regional and Global Governance and edited and published the professional journal *Regional and Global Development*. In the above context, Ning Qi, a foreign language expert, discusses the interdisciplinary attributes and connotations of regional and national studies, explains the current situation and target orientation of regional and national studies personnel training, and considers the feasibility of interdisciplinary internationalized regional and national studies personnel training in a hierarchical and categorical manner, taking the relevant personnel training practice of Peking University as an example.⁴

Existing Problems in the Development of Less Commonly Taught Language Majors in China

Although China's less commonly taught language education has achieved much, it also faces challenges and problems that need to be solved.

Carefully Planning the Opening of Less Commonly Taught Language Courses

At the present stage, the cultivation of less commonly taught language talents in China still faces various problems, such as the lack of a top-level design and macro layout of a national foreign language strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative. There is also a lack of long-term mechanisms for training and retaining of foreign language talents, especially the talents of languages along the Belt and Road Initiative. There is a great lack of high-level and multilingual foreign language talents in China. The opening of less commonly taught language majors needs to be carefully discussed and planned, with emphasis on cultivating

⁴ Ning Qi, "Theory and Practice of Cultivating Regional and Country Studies Talents: The Case of Peking University" [in Chinese], *Foreign Language World*, no. 3 (2020): 36–42.

high-end less commonly taught language talents to meet national needs while avoiding aimless and redundant developments. The core of these problems is the issue of language offerings, such as how many languages need to be offered in less commonly taught language education, how to offer them, and which languages to offer. There is an urgent need for comprehensive consideration, integration of resources, replanning, and making a comprehensive plan for the cultivation of less commonly taught language talents. First, we should consider the long-term and short-term needs and offer less commonly taught language appropriately; second, we should increase the number of students enrolled in major regional commonly used languages and encourage them to minor in similar less commonly taught languages; third, we should make full use of the language talent resources within our border minority areas to make up for the gap in the demand for language talents in our neighboring countries.⁵ In addition, the development of less commonly taught language education also needs to be promoted by building a resource base of less commonly taught language talents, a system to disseminate country-specific foreign discourse, and other supplementary programs. Currently, China has built a dynamic database of national foreign language talent resources and a national language volunteer talent pool, but the pool of less commonly taught language talents still needs to be continuously expanded, especially when it comes to highly qualified research specialists with skills in multiple languages, including uncommon ones.

Accelerating the Construction of Education Standards in Less Commonly Taught Language

To promote the professionalization of foreign language education in China, the state has formulated a series of teaching quality standards, syllabus and examination standards for foreign language majors and so forth. For example, in January 2018 the Ministry of Education officially promulgated the National Standard for Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Professional Classes in General Higher Education Institutions, in which the National Standards for Teaching Quality of Foreign Languages and Literature Classes specifies requirements of all aspects, including objectives, training specifications, curriculum system, teaching teams, and quality management. In 2013 the Steering Committee for Teaching Foreign Languages in Colleges and Universities of the Ministry of

⁵ Zhang Tianwei, “The Construction of Less Commonly Taught Languages Urgently Needs a Comprehensive Layout.”

Education officially launched the development of the Guide for Teaching College English, and in October 2020 this committee together with Higher Education Press officially released the Guide for Teaching College English. In 2018 the Ministry of Education released the English Rating Scale of China. Some scholars have already paid attention to these phenomena. For one, Dong Xixiao has made a preliminary argument for the development of proficiency rankings in less commonly taught languages of Central and Eastern Europe from two aspects of necessity and feasibility, taking into account the current situation of foreign language education in China.⁶

Driving Less Commonly Taught Language Development through Project Clusters

At the heart of the key language strategy implemented in the United States at this stage is the development of the less commonly taught languages, and the United States has been vigorously developing less commonly taught language proficiency through the National Security Education Program as a launching point, especially through program clusters, such as the US National Language Service Corps program, the Flagship Program, and the English for Heritage Language Speakers program. At this stage, our government and universities have set up many language talent training programs, such as the National Scholarship Council program and talent programs in various provinces and cities. Although the government has invested a lot, the implementation of these programs often lacks supervision, the quality of study is difficult to guarantee, and the responsibilities of serving the country after learning are vague, which therefore renders it difficult to achieve true fulfillment of the program goals. Also, the investment of national funds is not proportional to the return in terms of effectiveness. China can follow the example of the US program clusters and dedicate special funds to strengthen the talent assessment mechanisms and the obligation to serve the country, so that resource allocation and talent cultivation can be continuously optimized.

Conclusion

The key to national language capacity building is language education that

⁶ Dong Xixiao, “The Necessity and Feasibility of Developing a Proficiency Scale for Less Commonly Taught Languages in Central and Eastern Europe” [in Chinese], *Foreign Language Research*, no. 3 (2019): 94–99.

produces personnel with language skills. One of the priorities of national language capacity building is building capacity in less commonly taught languages, in other words, scientific and rational planning and development of less commonly taught language education. The development of less commonly taught language education does not happen overnight and requires a high degree of national attention, design from the top, and continuous investment. Only through rational planning, steady promotion, and sustainable development can we better serve the Belt and Road Initiative and effectively deal with matters of national strategic interests at home and abroad. In view of this, the reform and development of less commonly taught language education in China is urgent and has a long way to go, but challenges and opportunities coexist and require the joint efforts of the government, academia, and society.

Translated from the Chinese by David Hull

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