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## From “Sick Man” to Strong Man: The Changing Role of English Language Teaching in China in an Era of Rising Nationalism and Global Ambitions

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Since assuming leadership of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 2013, President Xi Jinping has enacted a series of sweeping political reforms aimed at cracking down on corruption, dissent, and the dissemination of ideas deemed harmful by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), while at the same time promoting a vision of individual prosperity, national unity, and global influence commonly referred to as the “Chinese Dream” (中国梦). These actions have been viewed by some media commentators (Buckley, 2018; Ma, 2018) and scholars

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(Bhattacharya, 2019; Gao, 2018; Wang & Yao, 2017) as signs of a resurgent nationalism that has accompanied Xi's rise to—and consolidation of—power. Interestingly, the term “neo-nationalism” rarely appears in these discussions (Gao, 2018, being a notable exception). Perhaps this is because there is nothing particularly new about nationalism in China. From Qin Shi Huangdi, the first emperor who united the country over two thousand years ago, to Zhang Yimou's 2002 film *Hero*, a fictionalized retelling of those events that ennobled the sacrifice of the individual for the greater good, the idea of a strong, unified China has been central to its near-mythological “5,000 years of history,” even during periods when the country was weak or divided.

The previous two centuries were particularly tumultuous for China, with various uprisings, invasions, and disasters threatening its unity. Accompanying much of this unrest was the question of the role that English, as the international language of commerce, higher education, science and technology, should play in bringing stability and prosperity to the nation. In this chapter, we provide a brief history of English in China, followed by more recent discussions about its role in the internationalization of Chinese universities (Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Feng, 2011; McPherron, 2017). We then examine changes that have occurred over the past two decades with regard to English language teaching (ELT) at a coastal university in southern China through the eyes of students and faculty, ourselves included. Our recounting of these experiences reveals a range of impacts that recent policy decisions have had on ELT practices in the PRC and point to pedagogical interventions that may help to balance the country's nationalist and internationalist desires.

## A Brief History of English in China

### Empire, Colonialization, and Revolution: 1664–1979

Although there had been limited prior contact with the language, English officially arrived in China in 1664, when British ships sailed into Canton (Guangzhou) and later established a trading outpost on Shamian Island in the Pearl River, the only place where foreigners were then allowed to

reside (Pride & Liu, 1988). At the time, China was arguably the richest country on earth, and the European desire for silk, porcelain, and tea was so great that Britain, France, the Netherlands, and other colonial powers willingly accepted the restrictions that the ruling Qing Dynasty placed on their movements and interactions in exchange for access to these goods. Imperial law forbade teaching Chinese to foreigners, and so business was carried out mainly in pidgin versions of English and other European languages. To balance its trade deficit, the British soon began importing opium from India to sell to the Chinese.

By the early nineteenth century, China found itself weakened by the scourge of opium addiction. Government efforts to crack down on the drug trade prompted Britain to send gunboats up the Pearl River, kicking off a series of armed conflicts known as the First and Second Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1869, respectively). After several defeats, China was forced to sign unequal treaties that gave the British control of Hong Kong and greater access to the Mainland. Christian missionaries soon found many Chinese eager to learn English in order to gain the scientific and technical knowledge needed to modernize their country. Of course, English and Christianity also met with anti-foreign hostility, which culminated in the Boxer Uprising and subsequent invasion by the Eight-Nation Alliance of foreign armies (1900–1901). These events helped to solidify a conflicted view of English as both “a threat to national integrity” and “a conduit for strengthening China’s position in the world” (Adamson, 2002, p. 231), with official government positions and popular opinion continuing to vacillate between these two extremes.

By the start of the twentieth century, China was widely viewed as what the philosopher Liang Qichao called “the sick man of Asia” (Osno, 2018),<sup>1</sup> with many of its port cities controlled by colonial powers and the imperial government losing its grip on power elsewhere. The nationalist revolution led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen brought an end to the Qing

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<sup>1</sup>While the term “sick man of Asia” was coined by a Chinese national, it is important to note that it is also regarded as derogatory by many Chinese today and was, in fact, the source of a recent controversy surrounding an opinion piece in *The Wall Street Journal* by Walter Russel Mead titled “China is the Real Sick Man of Asia,” which criticized the central government’s response to the coronavirus outbreak in 2019. As a result, three foreign journalists were expelled from the country (“China Expels Three”).

Dynasty in 1912 and ushered in a brief period of renewed hope that post-imperial China could finally modernize, with a little help from English. To that end, many young Chinese went to study abroad, especially in the United States, while Chinese schools modeled themselves on the American education system, despite pushback from those who desired a more “indigenous philosophy and system of education” (Adamson, 2002, p. 236). Such hopes were soon dashed, however, when civil war broke out between the Nationalists and Communists in 1927, followed by the Japanese invasion in 1937, which resulted in a temporary truce between the two sides. Once World War II ended, civil war resumed, with the Communists eventually winning and driving the Nationalists to the island of Taiwan.

Cold War hostilities between the United States and the Soviet Union led to Russian replacing English as the preferred foreign language in Chinese schools, although Mao Zedong later split with Khrushchev over the policy of de-Stalinization, which sparked a brief period of renewed interest in English (Gil & Adamson, 2011, p. 28). By the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, however, English had been banned and anyone speaking it was subject to “reeducation.” After Nixon’s visit to the PRC in 1972, the ban was gradually lifted, but it was Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms in 1979 that led to English becoming a required subject at nearly every level of Chinese education.

### **The “Third Wave” of English: 1980–2012**

The opening of China to the outside world caused a surge in enthusiasm for learning English, which Feng (2011) referred to as part of the “third wave” or “multidirectional movement brought on by the forces of globalisation” (p. 6), which was distinct from the first two unidirectional waves (i.e., British settler colonialism and exploitation colonialism, respectively). Bolton and Graddol (2012) documented evidence of this “third wave” of English learning in China including: a 2010 statistic that showed a US\$4.7 billion English language-training market; the inclusion of English, along with Chinese and mathematics, as a required subject on the *gaokao*, the national university entrance exam, which is taken by

about 10 million students every year; and the requirement that all university students pass the College English Test (CET) in order to graduate. They also noted that Chinese universities have continued to expand since the 1980s, thus allowing more Chinese access to higher education and, as of the early 2000s, giving China the largest university student population in the world (Bolton & Graddol, 2012, p. 3). In addition, there are now an estimated 400,000 foreign teachers in China, with up to two-thirds of those working without official papers (Quinn, 2019). The number of Chinese students studying at universities overseas, primarily in English-dominant countries, has also increased dramatically, reaching over 650,000 in 2018 (Shuo, 2019). As a result of all this activity, research on ELT in China has flourished in recent years (see Wang & Gao, 2008).

The growing enthusiasm for English has reignited questions about the threat that foreign languages pose to the Chinese sense of national identity. In the early 1990s, a young entrepreneur named Li Yang addressed this paradox head on by creating a unique pedagogical approach called “Crazy English,” which encouraged Chinese youth to overcome their inhibitions by shouting English phrases at the top of their lungs in order to, as he claimed, “conquer English to make China strong” (Hitchings, 2011). While Bolton (2002) dismissed this as “huckster nationalism” (p. 197), there is little doubt that Li Yang has helped to promote the view of English as a vehicle not only for importing ideas from the West but also for spreading Chinese culture and innovations to the rest of the world (Gao, 2012).

In many ways, the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing served as China’s “coming out party” to the world, with millions in attendance and millions more watching on TV. Soon after, China eclipsed Japan as the world’s 2nd largest economy. Within less than a century, Asia’s “sick man” had fully recovered and was ready to assume the role of the “strong man” once again. Xi Jinping has embodied this transformation more than anyone. He removed presidential term limits and assumed the mantle of “People’s Leader” (人民领袖), a title not used since Mao died. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, Xi’s administration is exercising the soft power of foreign aid and infrastructure development to extend China’s influence from

Pakistan to Nigeria, while a series of military reforms have strengthened its naval and air capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region.

Following the 2016 election of Donald Trump as U.S. President and the trade war that he initiated with China, as well as ongoing disputes over intellectual property rights and the political status of Taiwan, relations between the two nations have become strained. In 2017, the number of new college students from China studying in the United States had its sharpest decline in over a decade (Zhou, 2018). With the global COVID-19 pandemic and recent moves by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (2020) to remove temporary exemptions allowing F-1 and M-1 visa holders to remain in the United States while taking classes entirely online, those numbers are likely to drop even further.

While English retains a central role in Chinese education, there are signs that the country's enthusiasm for the language may be waning. The weight of the English section of the *gaokao* has recently been reduced, and there is growing opposition to the CET as a requirement for graduation (Yan, 2019). Part of this is the recognition that not every field of study or profession has equal need for English, but as Shao and Gao (2016) pointed out, "concerns about the status of English have also been related to the growing assertiveness of China's nationalism" (p. 25). Nevertheless, there remains a strong instrumental motivation for learning English as evidenced by the fact that most Chinese employers who conduct international business continue to prefer applicants who receive high scores on the CET. Expanding on Adamson's (2002) notion of English as both a threat and a boon to the nation, Yihong Gao (2009) proposed that these tensions are best viewed as a dialectic between the Chinese concepts of 体 ('ti,' meaning body or essence) and 用 ('yong,' utility or function), in which foreign languages and ideas are regarded as useful only in terms of their economic value; learning English was never meant to be part of the "essence" of Chinese education and identity.

## China Southern University: A Case Study of the “Third Wave” of English Learning and Rising Nationalism in China

As instructors at a university in southern China throughout the 2000s, the authors of this chapter observed numerous instances of the tension between utility and identity in our daily interactions with our students. For example, in 2004, Paul received an email from a student with the English name Guy who wrote, “To be honest, I don’t think many Chinese students really love English, include me. I don’t love learning English, I learn it just because I need it, sometimes [...] maybe I need it more in the future” (McPherron, 2017, p. viii). This email raised concerns about whether students really “need” to learn English and what role it actually plays in modern life for the majority of Chinese citizens. The student was clearly responding to an educational trend that began in the early 1980s and had reached its apex by the early 2000s. In fact, the student’s stated reluctance to learn English echoed the long history of ambivalence toward the language that began when those first British trading ships landed in 1664: identity versus utility, threat versus aid.

Drawing on the broad survey of ELT in China in the previous section, the chapter now investigates in more depth the recent history and accompanying tensions of English teaching in China through the lens of this comprehensive public university in southern China, where both of the authors have taught intermittently since 2004. We use the pseudonym of China Southern University (CSU) in the following sections and draw on the following collected data sources: (1) interviews with current and former CSU instructors and administrators; (2) student journal writing from a class trip to a local museum; and (3) the CSU website’s mission and curriculum descriptions. As we begin to move out of the “third wave” of the early 2000s, this analysis provides a case study of the complex relationship between ELT in China and the rise of a new nationalist movement in the Xi Jinping era. Therefore, we focus on the following research questions: (1) What impact is renewed Chinese nationalism having on the way that English is viewed and taught at CSU? (2) How is English being used inside and outside of classrooms there to balance China’s global ambitions with its national goals?

## CSU's Program for College English: A New Model for ELT in China

Founded in 1981 near a coastal city in Guangdong Province, CSU was the first university to be built in the region as part of the larger national modernization project. The initial funds for the university came from a prominent Hong Kong businessperson and, in the decades that followed, his philanthropic foundation continued to support the university and have a sizable influence on shaping its projects and policies. In aligning with national goals, the foundation attempted to mold CSU into a public Chinese university with an international focus that would serve as a link between the surrounding region and business communities outside of mainland China. To that end, the foundation implemented a number of curricular and cultural changes at the university, including a credit system in which students take classes with others outside of their major, a requirement for students in all majors to achieve a high level of English proficiency, and an increase in co-curricular activities dedicated to practicing English. To coordinate these efforts, the foundation created the Program for College English (PCE, a pseudonym) in 2000 and pushed for hiring more international instructors at CSU. To this day, the PCE organizes and teaches the various levels of English courses that all students must take until they meet the levels of proficiency required by their major. As a 2011 report stated, the program was created “for the sake of aligning the university with international standards, helping its students use English as a tool to explore Western culture and expanding its students’ horizons by teaching and encouraging critical thinking” (Liu & Xiao, 2011, p. 40).

From its inception, the PCE was tied to national educational reforms in China that advocated for Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches and student-centered classrooms. In 2008, the PCE’s mission statement noted:

We believe that a high-level of communicative competence (i.e., grammatical, pragmatic, discourse, and strategic competencies) is the ultimate goal for our students. We also believe that teaching innovation is informed by research, and students’ critical thinking strategies and learner



autonomy should be developed through both curricular and co-curricular activities. (CSU website, accessed March 3, 2008)

The statement later notes the program’s desire to align its practices with the “international community” and repeats ideas about teaching approaches found in various Chinese Ministry of Education policy statements from the 2000s (Feng, 2009). The PCE draws on common descriptions of CLT with such collocated terms as “teacher innovation,” “informed by research,” and “curricular and co-curricular activities” with the goal of “a high-level of communicative competence” (Duff, 2014; Nunan, 2014).

Furthermore, as part of these CLT-based approaches, directors of the PCE—working in close coordination with the Hong Kong foundation—attempted to inculcate CSU students with the view that English is a part of “who they are,” and not just a professional qualification or national addendum. For example, one former director, who we call Gene (all participants received pseudonyms) argued that the curriculum at CSU and other top universities in China should foster in students a desire to seek opportunities to use English outside of the classroom:

A lot of the students perceive the question as “do I need to use English.” More and more students are looking at this one question “need to,” but the other question is “do I have the opportunity to use it?” Too often students expect that they are going to be forced to [...] I think the students are partly changing how to look at that because I suspect some job situations are not that they are forced to, but maybe if they are conscious about it, they will seek out English. (personal communication, October 22, 2013)

Like other past directors, Gene viewed the work of the PCE as shaping students’ identities, something closer to a “hearts and minds” description of the role of English in the lives of students than to the *yong* (utility) of Li Yang’s prescription to “conquer English.”

## Trip to the Cultural Revolution Museum

As an illustration of the critical thinking, internationalization, and independent learning encouraged at the PCE in the 2000s, we present a class trip and writing activity that we did with our advanced writing students in the spring of 2007. For this activity, the PCE chartered a bus to take students to a nearby museum that had opened in 2005 and was the first dedicated to the history and atrocities of the Cultural Revolution, a political campaign begun by Chairman Mao in 1966 in which as many as half a million people were killed (French, 2005). The museum itself is situated in the countryside amidst lush rolling hills and resembles an outdoor park and shrine with visitors walking between open-air pagodas and monuments that chronicle devastating events and honor heroes from that period (see Fig. 9.1). Mao is shown growing increasingly old and powerless as students turn on each other and “the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution began to devour its own children” (French, 2005). We felt



Fig. 9.1 Cultural Revolution Museum mural and pagoda (June, 2007)

that exploring such a difficult period would provide our students with a link to a discussion of what makes a country "great" and how to come to terms with the more troubling aspects of its past. As part of the preparation for the trip, we read about and discussed a variety of historical events including slavery in North America, the Japanese occupation of China, and the Holocaust.

During the trip, we asked students to take notes about what they saw and then, following the visit, to write in their journals on the topic of how a country should remember and learn from its past. In their responses, many of the students focused on their shock at learning for the first time about this part of Chinese history. One student with the English name of Sunny wrote:

As Paul said, maybe every country has its own crazy history, such as Hitler made German kill Jew, America white people killed American Indian nation. But in Cultural Revolution, Chinese killed or persecuted Chinese. Actually, Hanese killed or persecuted Hanese! They were the same race or nation! Chinese never fought for religious problem. I don't know why they lose their human nature, maybe as a person said, they just exhibited the human nature. Usually, we just talked about the Cultural Revolution's process, how it happened, how it went on, and who is the main role in this process. But we may forget the basic and original questions: Why did it happen, why did public become crazy, why did it go so long, and why did the main roles acted at that time? (student journal, June 11, 2007)

She was shocked not only by the atrocities themselves but also by the fact that Chinese people were committing these acts upon each other without racial or religious motivations. Through her list of "whys," it appeared that, for the first time, Sunny was questioning the notion of a unified Chinese nation and people.

Other students went even further, directly criticizing the government and connecting its reluctance to address the Cultural Revolution to current political problems. For example, a student called Windy wrote in her journal about environmental concerns and the lack of representative democracy:

To tell the truth, many people still respect Mao as our government holds the media in hand. Few people would like to talk about Mao's big mistakes. As a student, I don't think China is now or soon will be a great nation. China has a long, long way to go. There are many social problems and environmental problems in China. Chinese government is still young. They have a lot of work to do. I can see Chinese people are controlled by the government. We Chinese have no real vote right and equal treatment in many respects. (student journal, June 11, 2007)

Another student named Joe similarly critiqued the absence of a free press:

There were many lessons we can learn from the Culture Revolution. But for me, I think the most important thing is that we should not believe the press easily. If I haven't visited the museum I will not know the reality and believe in what textbooks tell. So we must investigate and analyze anything [that] happens in the world. (student journal, June 11, 2007)

It is important to note that these students might not have felt comfortable offering such criticisms if they had been writing in Chinese or to a non-foreign teacher. However, the trip was approved by the university and clearly fit with its goals of encouraging co-curricular activities and critical thinking (in fact, the businessman who helped found CSU had also donated to the museum). Although tensions about the role of English still existed, there was a sense then that universities such as CSU would continue to have more and more freedom to challenge students through these types of activities. Sadly, the museum was shuttered in 2016, only to be reopened later with a new focus on "Socialist Core Values" and all mention of the Cultural Revolution removed (Tatlow, 2016).

## Rising Nationalism at CSU

Since coming to power, President Xi has, as noted above, enacted a number of political reforms aimed at strengthening government control across all parts of Chinese society while, at the same time, limiting the influence of Western ideas and values. At the university level, he

launched campaigns to ensure that teachers “cultivate and practice the core values of socialism in their teaching” (Holtz, 2018). Meanwhile, China’s Ministry of Education has called for bans on textbooks that promote Western values (Buckley, 2015).

Perhaps due to its strong ties to the Hong Kong business community and distance from Beijing, CSU was largely able to continue its mission of nurturing critical thinking and learner autonomy. Over the course of the 2016–2017 academic year, however, a CCP inspection team compiled a critical report of the university’s curriculum and practices, which concluded that the government needed to “strengthen its supervision of foreign teachers, classroom discussions, and even online posts” (Holtz, 2018). Unsurprisingly, the report had repercussions that were felt throughout the university. Among English language teachers at CSU, who were accustomed to leading thought-provoking discussions and activities such as our field trip to the Cultural Revolution museum, there are now concerns about the mission of the university going forward and the role that English will play. In June 2019, the businessman whose foundation has strongly supported CSU since its inception did not attend its graduation ceremony for the first time in 18 years, with media reports speculating on whether the two have severed ties (Zhang, 2019).

In the next section, we analyze PCE faculty perspectives in light of the recent nationalist wave in Chinese education and politics, focusing on two themes that emerged from our interviews: (1) fear that CSU will not retain its reputation for internationalization and innovative teaching practices; and (2) pride in the history and mission of CSU and the PCE.

### **Fear: “They Would Just Remain Utterly Silent”**

As instructors at CSU, we were labeled as “foreign experts” on our official residency cards and as “foreign teachers” by our students and colleagues. This was in contrast to the label of “local teacher,” as instructors with Chinese citizenship were called. At other Chinese universities, local and foreign teachers may not interact frequently or collaborate on curriculum and assessment, but CSU has always actively encouraged partnerships

between them, thus creating a sense of community in which all instructors feel like they are valued and belong (McPherron, 2016). Despite the CCP review and critique of CSU in 2017, both local and foreign teachers still value their close collaborations and shared work goals, but many of them, and foreign teachers in particular, fear that the growing governmental oversight could divide the two groups, thereby weakening the university's reputation for international cooperation and innovative teaching. One reason for this fear was the recent movement of the PCE within the Division of Arts and Sciences. Since its inception, the PCE had been its own unit that reported directly to the Provost's Office and was given a fair degree of autonomy in setting its learning objectives. The change has affected the role of the PCE and English in general at CSU, as Beth, another former director, noted:

There seem to be certain political restrictions again on foreign influence, which obviously also concerns English teaching. It is still necessary for the economic and scientific development of the country but it is definitely put under control, also regarding who is invited to teach and take on administrative responsibility [...] due to this movement, the influence and support of the foundation has diminished considerably. One recent change is that [PCE] is again under the umbrella of liberal arts, albeit as a separate unit I believe. That is a concentration of power and will have effects depending on who is in charge. (personal communication, September 25, 2019)

Xander, a local English teacher with over thirty years of experience, also saw some of the changes that occurred following the departmental restructuring as having a negative impact on the English instruction provided by the PCE, although he attributed these mainly to the rapid growth that the university had experienced in recent years and a push for more double-majors.

Lots of students started choosing English as their second major and, because of this, they didn't have much time. They didn't have many credit hours for them to choose other elective courses in English. So, starting in 2016, [and] especially 2017, our elective courses haven't been very successful because not very many students signed up for them, fewer

than 10, [and so] definitely that course should be canceled. And right now, because of the expansion, [CSU] has recruited more students, and we don't have enough teachers. (personal communication, June 29, 2019)

Another local teacher, Ethan, who graduated from university in an English-dominant country, echoed these concerns about how growing enrollments were putting a strain on the quality of education that could be delivered in the English classroom.

Recently the university required the increase of student numbers in one class, which, to some extent, created certain negative impacts on how students would communicate and interact with each other. Another issue is related to teacher training as some teachers do not have any idea on teaching methodology. Although this claim might be too absolute, I see the necessity of more teacher training and professional development. (personal communication, August 8, 2019)

In discussing these changes, Ethan also mentioned the ongoing debate about “whether the Chinese language and culture will be ‘contaminated’ when people learn a foreign language,” but he did not see this as a major concern for most students at CSU.

Some foreign instructors, however, remarked that topics they had once openly discussed in class were no longer permissible, even if no official edict had been handed down. According to Rick, who had been living and teaching in China for nearly two decades:

I remember in 2013 or 2014, we fairly openly discussed the Umbrella Revolution, the stuff that happened in Hong Kong, and it would never even occur to me to raise that topic in class nowadays because your ability to teach, and especially with second language learners, depends on a willingness to speak, to communicate about something. They would be so nervous and recognize that it's something politically dangerous, they would just remain utterly silent. So, for one there would be no point. (personal communication, July 12, 2019)

He found it ironic that, at a time when the students in his classes displayed higher levels of English proficiency than in the past, the

subjects that they could speak and write about were being limited in other ways. He continued:

The students in those early days, like 2004, were very eager and kind of open, but their actual abilities and knowledge, most of them were fairly limited. The students nowadays in China [...] their knowledge level and their skill level, their sophistication with the language and their English ability, and just their general world knowledge, are phenomenal [...] That sea change of super knowledgeable, elite, educated, proficient university students in this foreign language school is still very foreign to them [government and school officials]. The part structure is somehow threatened, and this needs to be reined in or it's gone too far. (personal communication, July 12, 2019)

Rick also mentioned a feature of teaching at CSU that many instructors have noticed and one that is, in fact, promoted via its websites and promotional materials: students have many more opportunities to use their English abilities through travel, work, and exchanges between CSU and its partner universities. At the same time, the freedom that instructors once had to lead innovative curricular and co-curricular activities, such as our field trip to the Cultural Revolution, has been limited or completely stifled. The censoring of open discourse, whether explicit or implicit, led Rick to wonder if it is even ethical to ask students to think critically about sensitive topics and investigate them through standard research practices when “following them to their logical end would get a young person in trouble” (personal communication, July 12, 2019).

Even with such fears lingering, most of the CSU instructors that we interviewed still believed that English would continue to be taught at universities throughout China, although one foreign teacher named Jerry felt that its role in the internationalization of Chinese education was changing.

I do not feel that English learning is continuing to grow, based on my own observations over time. We started with enthusiasm in the early 2000s, which persisted and grew into the early 2010s, but in later years I felt an increase in apathy toward—if not resistance to—English-related activities at [CSU], even as numbers of attendance increased [...] Though



I don't know the details, I think it's clear that there are political reasons for the decline of English—so quickly after a surge in the popularity of the language. A general sense of anti-colonial face-saving combined with the rise of a notion that Chinese language can be a contender for a lingua franca. (personal communication, August 22, 2019)

Many Chinese wish to see Mandarin become a global lingua franca, and indeed the language is expanding along with China's economic might, but it remains a long way from reaching the international status of English (see Gil, 2011). Nevertheless, Jerry worried that English would soon be “placed on a backburner,” in much the same way that Russian as a foreign language had lost favor in the past. He noted “an attitude shift” at CSU through the “downgrading of the role of the [PCE].” In fact, Jerry decided that the political climate had changed too much, and he returned to the United States in 2018 after over 20 years as an English instructor in China.

### **Pride: “We Still Play the Role that We Have Been Playing”**

Although some of the foreign teachers we interviewed expressed fears that the CSU community they had helped to build was increasingly unwelcoming to outside influence, most of them continued to praise the innovative teaching approaches. Likewise, the local teachers felt a strong sense of pride in the unique position that CSU has occupied among Chinese universities in terms of its international focus and communicative approach to ELT. As Xander pointed out:

In the past, we mainly focused on teaching students the kind of skills to pass each test because, at that time, passing CET-4 is a requirement for graduation, and there's a certain score students need to pass. Otherwise, they couldn't get a degree [...] So our main task is just to help them cover the material, help them to pass the test. But with the establishment of the [PCE], we changed to really focus on communication. That's why you [foreign teachers] came and you know that's kind of different from other universities in China. (personal communication, June 29, 2019)

Furthermore, he noted that the recruitment of “foreign experts” has been helpful not only for students but also for his own English proficiency, and he valued the sense of community that had been created between local and foreign teachers.

Despite the changes that had occurred over the last decade and the general sense of uncertainty about the future of international cooperation on Chinese university campuses, our participants continued to believe that an emphasis on ELT would remain at CSU. As a former director of PCE, Gene noticed that “there have been dramatic changes in ELT in China since the early 1980s, with much more focus on actual English proficiency. While levels of interest in learning English have always been relatively high, my sense is that this is actually still increasing rather than declining.” Xander also believed that the PCE would continue with its mission, even if it had less autonomy than in the past.

Let me put it this way, I would still like to say that even now the students know that [PCE] has become part of [the Division of Arts and Sciences], we still play the role that we have been playing. That means English education here is still very important, and I’m sure the school leaders also attach great importance to English education here, even though now it’s kind of merged [that] doesn’t mean they don’t think English is important. (personal communication, June 29, 2019)

Jerry, the former PCE instructor who returned to the United States, was less optimistic about the state of ELT in China, which he saw as declining after peaking in the early 2010s, although he too felt that enthusiasm for English still remained strong at CSU.

There is a core of hard-working students and teachers who remain dedicated to the promotion of both ELT and collaborative learning. If only that core remains as English becomes an option rather than a requirement, I doubt that consequences would be severe, other than fewer job opportunities for foreign teachers. (personal communication, August 22, 2019)

Local teacher Ethan expressed a similarly conflicted view of the role that English plays—and will continue to play—in Chinese higher education,

but he too sees the utility of English serving as a stronger motivation for studying it than any requirements for matriculation or graduation that may or may not change in the near future.

I once doubted the role of English for students’ future career, especially some graduates who worked at jobs that do not require English. I also doubted whether English should be a required subject for all students at [CSU] and I really do not have a clear answer, for all Chinese universities too. I think it is still important for English to be a required subject of the *gao kao* as long as *gao kao* exists [...] If made optional, most students would still choose to take English because they never know their future career and further education. (personal communication, August 8, 2019)

For Ethan, the globalized economy and greater mobility would continue to stoke enthusiasm among the Chinese people for learning English, but he felt that an overemphasis on testing had obscured more pressing concerns.

The issue lies in how teaching and assessment can reflect the reality of language use. Another issue is how English teaching can be directed to a more sociolinguistic and sociocultural aspects instead of teaching English as a language per se, as well as how local ELT professionals can be empowered to take the ownership of English. (personal communication, August 8, 2019)

While the outlooks of our participants on the future of English education in China varied somewhat, there was a shared sense of pride in the contributions that CSU had made, and it appeared that, at least outwardly, the university continued to view ELT as central to its broader goals, as illustrated in a recent online listing for a position in the PCE. In seeking new instructors, the job description states that CSU is “aggressively internationalizing its program and expanding its English-medium course offerings.” Furthermore, the PCE is described in the advertisement as “a pioneering program of language instruction that emphasizes not only practical language proficiency but also critical thinking skills, intercultural competence, and sustainable independent language learning.” For the authors of this chapter, the description differs

little from the one that they read when they first applied to work at CSU in 2004, which suggests that the shifting political winds blowing down from Beijing were not yet strong enough to knock the university off course.

Some of our participants wondered if this was simply the calm before the storm, and it is reasonable to be concerned about the future of ELT in China and the roles that foreign teachers will play. At the same time, the PCE continues to seek instructors who can bring innovative teaching practices and outside perspectives to this vibrant academic community. Hopefully, CSU and other Chinese universities will continue to serve as spaces for international dialogue and cooperation rather than falling prey to the fear of foreign ideas, influence, and individuals that is the hallmark of neo-nationalism around the world.

## **Conclusion: Which Way Will the Wave Break?**

Throughout much of the past two hundred years, China has moved between opening up to the outside world and retreating into isolation. In much the same way, attitudes toward the teaching and learning of English have often shifted between valuing its utility as an international language and rejecting its foreign essence as a malady that could cause a relapse of the “sick man” condition. In this era of rising nationalism, it remains difficult to tell which way the latest wave will break.

While some of the instructors who we interviewed felt that the current political climate had put restraints on the topics that could be safely addressed in the classroom, most were fairly certain that English would remain an important subject in Chinese higher education, even if requirements were lessened or abandoned altogether. For them, the utility that students saw in studying English as an international language and the opportunities it presented for furthering their personal careers, while simultaneously helping to strengthen the nation as a whole, would ultimately win out over any fears they may have about the potentially harmful effects of foreign languages and ideas on national unity.

We remain cautiously optimistic that the internationalization of Chinese higher education has progressed too far since the 1980s to

ever again be cut off entirely from the rest of the world. Nevertheless, instructors may need to be more creative with the pedagogical interventions they stage as they continue to promote critical thinking and global perspectives in the classroom. One option would be to have students conduct sociolinguistic field research to see how English was actually being used in the community (e.g., on campus, billboards, tourist attractions). Another possibility would be to set up email exchanges between university students in China and those elsewhere in the world using English as a *lingua franca*. Students could prepare interview questions for each other about college life, professional goals, and other topics of interest, and then use the responses to write profiles of their foreign counterparts that examined where similarities and differences might lie.

On the institutional level, Chinese universities would ideally continue to create and provide financial assistance for study abroad programs. CSU has many partner universities that students can attend for a semester or more, and we were encouraged to learn that, despite recent developments, these opportunities have continued and, in some cases, even expanded. In addition, CSU and other universities could welcome more teacher education programs from abroad that would provide Chinese students with additional opportunities to connect with an international English-speaking world.

Of course, these opportunities could still lead to the same tensions, difficult questions, and eventual censure that our trip to the Cultural Revolution Museum faced, but we contend that such tensions are actually what make a country great, so long as they are not suppressed. Furthermore, opportunities for internationalization could be conducted in any language—after all, students, scholars, and professionals from around the world are learning Mandarin as an additional language, and Spanish is now a major at CSU—but the desire to learn English will remain strong as long as students in China have the ability to connect with people from other countries, whether through online communication, study abroad, or contact with foreign teachers in the classroom. In this way, English will remain vital to Chinese higher education and, perhaps more importantly for government officials, to the larger goal of strengthening the nation.

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