China and Chinese, or Chingland and Chinglish?

NIU QIANG AND MARTIN WOLFF

Have recent developments in language policy begun to endanger China's autonomy?

In the West, business leaders calculate the cost/benefit of every decision. This includes consideration of *hard*, *soft* and *psychic* costs and benefits (both tangible and intangible): that is, *hard* (currency, raw materials, labor, logistics, etc.), *soft* (loans, grants, charitable contributions, sponsorships, good will, etc.), and *psychic* (reputation, brand identification, celebrity association or endorsement, etc.). On the other hand, Western political leaders tend to calculate public opinion (as measured or determined by surveys conducted by professional pollsters) and make popular decisions that are more likely to translate into extended political life.

Western business leaders keep their attention focused on business longevity and profit, while Western political leaders keep their attention focused on political longevity. As a result, both groups of leaders, more often than not, develop "tunnel vision", which can – and often does – produce unexpected, unanticipated and unwanted results, which could have been avoided through a more expansive or comprehensive world-view.

Sometimes, very good people with good intentions make very bad decisions which unintentionally produce bad consequences and worse ramifications. For example, to what extent, if any, has China adopted or embraced western tunnel vision in its decision to embrace the wholesale teaching of English as a Second Language throughout China – purely for anticipated future economic gain? Have all the probable or foreseeable consequences and ramifications been carefully studied, examined and debated?

China has made a deliberate and calculated decision to open its door to the world, to join the "new world order" (in effect, an English-based world government emanating out of Washington and London), and reap the economic benefits of participation in the new global economy through WTO (World Trade Organization) membership, hosting the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, and hosting the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai. A great deal has been written about China's preparation to take its rightful place as a major participant in the new world order and a great deal has also been written about the basic changes that must take place within China in order to comply with the requirements of membership.

However, have all of the consequences and ramifications been adequately contemplated,

NIU QIANG was born and raised in Shenyang, Liaoning Province, the People's Republic of China. She obtained both her BA in English (1991) and her MA in English Linguistics (1996) from Jilin University, and her PhD in English Linguistics (1999) from Shanghai International Studies University. She is currently an Associate Professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Tong ji University, Shanghai, China, where she teaches psycholinguistics, second language acquisition, and the testing of English as a second language. <*donna_niu@yahoo.com*>

MARTIN WOLFF was born in Rochester, New York, USA. He obtained his JD (Juris Doctor: Doctor of Law) degree (1976) from Loyola University, Los Angeles. He has taught legal English, business English, business management, marketing, human relations, and English conversation. He is currently a Foreign Expert at the School of Foreign Languages, the Shanghai Institute of International Exchange, as part of the Sino-Canadian Joint Program. <*teachbesl@yahoo.co.uk*>

DOI: 10.1017/S0266078403002025
English Today 74, Vol. 19, No. 2 (April 2003). Printed in the United Kingdom © 2003 Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078403002025 Published online by Cambridge University Press

or, has the tunnel vision of Western influence already crept stealthily into the highest level of decision-making in China? Has the promise of economic prosperity and parity blinded China to certain inescapable realities?

In the past ten years, there has been an alarming increase in the emphasis on English as a Second Language (ESL) in China. Public middle schools, high schools and universities throughout China have developed and implemented English-language programs. Private ESL schools (kindergartens, primary, high and college) have proliferated to such an extent that there are now an estimated 3,000 private ESL schools in the city of Shanghai alone (source: *Shanghai Star*, 10-17-02). At first blush, it may appear admirable that China has so wholeheartedly made such a concerted effort to adopt English, the international language of commerce, as its second language. On October 24, 2002, Zang Xinsheng, Vice-Minister of the Ministry of Education reportedly said: "With China's accession to the World Trade Organization and the approaching Olympics in 2008 more than ever is it a priority for young Chinese to learn and improve their language skills" (source: "Government encourages public to learn English," *China Daily*, 10-25-02). The same article states that "Beijing is striving to reach its goal of teaching citizens to speak English to improve its image as an international metropolis."

Chinese students studying ESL believe that they will eventually reap increased economic benefits as a direct result of ESL study. A survey of 1,000 Chinese ESL students, conducted by the authors, revealed that their motivation was predicated upon either their parents' desire or their own desire for an improved economic future.

If we apply Western cost/benefit analysis to ESL in China, it could hardly be disputed that this national educational and linguistic revolution will provide substantial economic benefits to both China and the Chinese people. But an alarm bell has been sounded by such eminent scholars as Professor To Choyee of Hong Kong, who argues that the widespread study of English is a waste of valuable resources to the detriment of the study of Mandarin (cf. *Shanghai Star* 10-24-02, "English Dominance").

Linguistic scholars apparently all agree that language and culture are inseparable. Therefore, as Chinese students learn English, they also learn Western culture. As Chinese students study Western business, they necessarily learn all about "democracy" (simple majority rule by means of voluntary elections), which is the foundation for Western corporate ownership and management control. It follows that the nationwide Chinese ESL campaign brings with it an immersion in Western concepts, including social, cultural, business and political thought. It is inevitable that a certain amount of traditional Chinese thought will give way to a certain amount of Western thought, which translates into a society developing with confusing input.

The final result may be a country that is neither purely Chinese nor purely Western, but rather a Westernized China which might more aptly, if ruefully, be referred to as "Chingland." The people, their culture, and their language will either be Mandarin sprinkled with English words or a Westernized Chinese people who speak broken English, or "Chinglish", comparable to the "Singlish" of Singapore, the "pidgin English" of Hawaii, or the Creole of Louisiana (*Shanghai Star* 10-24-02 "Guangzhou … public servants should possess an English vocabulary of at least 1,000 words.")

Moreover, the current political structure of China will not be immune to the forces of change wrought by the intense study of "Democracy" in Business English or MBA courses. Once the "simple majority rule by voluntary election" genie has been let out of the bottle and grasped by the simple majority, it can not be forced back into the bottle. The infusion of foreign businesses into China with their Western model of "Democratic" management will further indoctrinate Chinese business leaders in the Western principles of "Democracy." It will no longer be a question of *if* Democracy will ever have a serious impact on China's politics, but *when*. Is the "Democracy" being taught through ESL compatible with the long-term goals and objectives of the Chinese Communist Party? Again, utilizing Western business cost/benefit analysis, we may ask: What is the real cost of China's quest to garner its slice of the global economic pie? And is the price to be paid too high?

China is recognized as a developing nation in economic terms. But has adequate consideration been given to the fact that it is also a developing nation in social and cultural terms and that its nationwide ESL program provides a defining moment in that development? Have the anticipated economic benefits unintention-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078403002025 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ally predestined such basic and fundamental changes in China's social, cultural and political fabrics that a grassroots backlash may occur? Why has China apparently forsaken Mandarin for English when 25% of the world's population already speaks Mandarin, and Mandarin is one of the six working languages of the United Nations? Why does China so meekly submit to the English-based new world order emanating out of Washington, D.C., when 25% of the world's population looks to Beijing for its leadership? Does China not yet realize the reality that the emerging China has the immediate clout to demand that those desiring to do business in China or with China should learn Mandarin, rather than expect 1.3 billion Chinese to learn English?

If China is to maintain its national sovereignty, must it not also maintain the use of Mandarin as its vehicle of international communication with the rest of the world? There are those who suggest that it is a matter of practical expediency for China to use English in the short term and that when China reaches economic maturity, it can always return to the use of Mandarin. The obvious danger with this argument is that the world is investing in a global business communication system based upon English and it will not willingly spend the time or resources necessary to later change to Mandarin just to accommodate China. It is also doubtful that China itself would ever attempt to press the subsequent international use of Mandarin once it has settled into the use of English and finds it suitable for its international business purposes.

The European Union has a very firm understanding of the relationship between maintaining a national language and maintaining a national identity. Enko Landeburn, chief of the EU enlargement office, reportedly said, "It is the democratic right of every member state to use its own language. This rule must be kept" (*China Daily* 11-5-02: "European union turning into Tower of Babel with enlargement"). Following this EU model on a world scale, all WTO rules and regulations, proceedings and decisions, should be translated into Mandarin, as should all international business transactions involving China or its business entities. This of course gives credence to Professor To's support (above) for ESL as a means of meeting the need of specific professionals only (*Shanghai Star* 10-24-02, "English Dominance"). Translators would certainly fall within this category, as would lawyers, accountants, scientists and other professionals who have an identifiable need to learn proper or precise English.

The capital cash outflow through the ESL program could be stemmed and redirected to the multitude of translators that would be required. This would provide an additional economic benefit to China created by the enhanced study of Mandarin rather than the current ESL emphasis. Capital flight through foreign expert ESL teachers would be restrained and the money redirected to pay local Chinese translation teachers.

Could or should China learn something from the EU's prioritizing the preservation and continued use of native languages? Is the risk posed by ESL to China's social, cultural and even political structures and systems outweighed by the potential economic benefits such that China's Chineseness is for sale? ESL at any cost? Should the love of money replace traditional Chinese wisdom as the most valuable asset of the new Chingland? Should economic gain be at the expense of what makes China different from all other nations? National identity is tied directly to the preservation of the native language.

It would appear that linguistic and other scholars throughout China have a fundamental obligation to seek enlightened answers to the questions posed herein and to provide the appropriate guidance to China's leadership so that the future course for China may be properly charted in the best interests of the people of China and thus avoid decisions resulting from tunnel vision. Is it incongruous that while China's relics and antiques are not for sale, the underlying heart and culture of China is now on the auction block? ■

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078403002025 Published online by Cambridge University Press