

## The Exercise of Power: Analysis of the Role of China English in Cross-Cultural Communication

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### Abstract

The globalization of English has caused its localization. With normative English at the core, China English is used to express the unique things of Chinese society and culture. The influence of the Chinese language in the world is still very limited. Thus, the use of China English is the inevitable choice to strengthen China’s foreign exchange and communication with different cultures. Since English is the lingua franca of today’s world, the English-speaking countries, as the case stands, are in control of the discourse power in the international exchanges, which has resulted in the inequalities in the cross-cultural communication practices between the English-speaking countries and non-English-speaking countries. The promotion and use of China English are of great strategic significance to ensure the security of Chinese national culture, highlight the cultural discourse power of China and carry out the external dissemination of Chinese culture.

**Key words:** Chinese culture; China English; Cross-cultural communication; Discourse power

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### INTRODUCTION

English is the lingua franca of today’s world. According to the statistics of British scholar David Crystal (2001), English is used as the first language in 57 countries around the world with a population of 450 million; the second language in 67 countries with a population of 350 million; the chief foreign language with a population of 1.2-1.5 billion. And more than a third of people in the world have acquired a certain level of English. One of the results of the English globalization is its localization, namely English and local cultures combined to produce the corresponding country-specific variants of English. Consequently, China English, the localized English variety in China, possesses special linguistic features and socio-cultural implications.

The concept of China English was first proposed by Ge (1980). China English integrates the international standard of normative English with Chinese local culture and local unique pronunciation, vocabulary, expression, grammar, discourse and other features of the Chinese language, presenting high intelligibility and acceptability. The academic communities both in China and abroad have had a gradually deepening understanding of and done more research on China English since the concept was advanced in 1980s. According to the statistics of Li (2006), more than 30 papers have been published on China English in the internationally renowned journals of *World Englishes* and *English Today*. In 2002, *World Englishes* published a special issue of China English studies. The research on China English has already been voluminous in China so far. But at present, the domestic and foreign studies on China English have mainly been conducted from the perspectives of linguistics, translation, culture and other adjacent disciplines.

This paper aims at examining the political significance of China English and its due role in the cross-cultural

communication from the angles of political science and sociolinguistics.

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## 1. LANGUAGE AND POWER IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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### 1.1 The Relationship Between Language and Power

Since ancient Greece and Roman times, the research and discussion on “power” have been occupying an important position in the fields of philosophy, politics, sociology, and so on. From Plato, Aristotle to Marx, and then to the contemporary western theorists, the mainstream view of academia has regarded power or authority as the ability of individuals or organizations to influence or dominate other people. On the whole, the classical view of power is mostly concerned about sovereignty and domination, especially about the state power. The focuses of the theory of power have always been who wields and exercises dominance and how to defend and consolidate its dominant power.

Through his theory of discourse power, Michel Foucault has examined, reflected on, and discussed the question of power from a brand-new perspective, he said: “We live in a world of symbols and language. ....many people, including me, think what the real things do not exist; there is only language. We are talking about a language and we talk in the language.” (Liu, 1995) The theory claims that language is power; language is the material form of ideology and the primary medium for social control; where there is discourse, there is power; power is the dominant force in the operation of discourse.

Inspired by this theory, the research of language has gradually gone beyond the category of linguistics, in conjunction with the analysis of social history, politics and ideology. For example, Norman Fairclough has asserted that we must seek the path to maintaining power by means of language, for ideology is always involved in the maintenance of unequal power relations and usually expressed through language, he stated that “in the modern society, the exercise of power is more and more through ideology, more specifically, through the ideological operation of language..... Language may have become the basic medium of social control and power.” (Xin, 2006)

### 1.2 The Nature of Cross-Cultural Communication

According to the definition given by Hu (2013), cross-cultural communication is the process for people with different cultural backgrounds to engage in communication. The connotation of the definition is very rich, where “with different cultural backgrounds” can mean two sides, two people, two nations, or two countries; “to engage in communication” can mean both peaceful political, economic, cultural exchanges and

confrontation, conflicts and even wars. Therefore, the research fields of cross-cultural communication studies are very broad, as Samovar et al. (2000) have clarified that cross-cultural communication copes with changes—the changes in the world relations and how we should adapt to these changes. The cross-cultural communication in this paper refers to the contacts and exchanges between the two peoples or countries.

English-speaking countries and non-English-speaking countries are not equal in the practice of cross-cultural communication. In today's world, English, the de facto lingua franca, is the first choice for cross-cultural communication, serving as the medium of multicultural communication and the carrier of multiculturalism. English-speaking countries are in control of the world's most massive wealth and the most advanced science and technology, accordingly demonstrating the power of English discourse and generating the value system and civilization model of western centralism on the global stage. Taking their particular national interests into consideration, non-English-speaking countries, societies and individuals can survive and develop in the tide of economic globalization only by training a sufficient number of English-speaking talents and gaining the ability to dialogue with the English-speaking world.

One of the results of English globalization is the localization of English. The process of localization is actually a process of regeneration, which is the combination of English and native cultures. From a cultural point of view, there is a wide gap between the East and the West. Many things in China are simply untranslatable, including notions, social norms, foods, music forms, national cultures, lifestyles, etc.. Therefore, the English variety used in China is inevitably influenced by the Chinese language, the profound cultural heritage, the complex society and 5,000 years of history. From a theoretical point of view, China English, like other English varieties such as Indian English, New Zealand English, and even British English or American English, should be considered as a member of the international English family.

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## 2. THE ROLE OF CHINA ENGLISH IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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### 2.1 China English and the Security of Chinese National Culture

Cultural security refers to the state of a cultural system, that is, “the state of its normal operation and continuous development, and the state of the cultural interests not being threatened” (Peng, 2001, p.40). With the accelerating process of globalization, the competition of major world powers is intensifying, which has made the security of national culture is more prominent issue in China. In September 2002, the Then Minister of Foreign

Affairs Tang (2002) pointed out at the 57<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly that security is no longer purely military, but also involving politics, economy, finance, science and technology, culture and other fields. On behalf of the Chinese government, Tang Jiaxuan put forward clearly for the first time the cultural security problem in China. In April 2014, when chairing the first meeting of the Central National Security Commission, Chinese President Xi Jinping (2014) for the first time proposed to adhere to the overall national security outlook, emphasizing both traditional and non-traditional security while listing cultural security as one of the eleven elements of the contemporary national security system (Xi, 2014). Cultural security has become an important component of China's national security system, along with political security, military security and economic security.

Language security is an important part of the national cultural security as language is the carrier of culture. As English is the preferred medium for cross-cultural communication and the international lingua franca, English has penetrated into all aspects of social and cultural life of China, backed up by the strong political, economic and cultural power of English-speaking countries. Impact of English on China's cultural security is mainly reflected in the following two aspects:

Firstly, the Chinese language has been eroded by English to a certain extent. Along with the development of globalization and informationization, English acronyms and abbreviations without translation are springing up in Chinese mass media swarming and have penetrated into all aspects of social and cultural life in China. At the moment, English expressions like NATO, VCD, VCR, OA, GDP, DIY, NBA, FIFA, CPI, MOOC, AQI, 4S, 3G, ATM, GPS, VIP, APP, IQ, EQ, F1, etc. have become common terms in movies, TV series, videos, newspapers, other varieties of burgeoning media, and even in some formal national publications and official documents, leading to the fact that the proportion of English expressions in Chinese is getting higher and higher. Excessive use of untranslatable English expressions and their rapid expansion make the Chinese language tend to lose its purity and stability and have brought inconvenience to the general public because Chinese characters are intrinsically incompatible with the alphabetic writing system of English.

Secondly, the strength of English leads to the loss of the concept of equal communication. Samue (1989) once said that with regard to the stability of a traditional society, what poses a major threat is not foreign aggression, but the invasion of foreign ideas; prints and remarks advance faster and influence deeper than troops and tanks. Cross-cultural communication is the exchange between two different cultures, also one between the local culture and the target culture, which imply that the two sides of communication are supposed to equal in status. In

that case, if the knowledge of English culture can promote the cross-cultural communication, it is essential for English speakers to master the Chinese culture as well. The inability to express the Chinese local culture is equivalent to the deprivation of one party of communication, let alone the equality of cross-cultural communication.

For instance, Chinese English teachers in their own teaching practice attach great importance to understanding and adapting the language and culture of English-speaking countries while deliberately ignoring the introduction of Chinese culture. According to the theory of language transfer in the second language acquisition theory, language learners' first language always has a great influence on his or her second language learning. However, Chinese English teachers often exaggerate the negative transfer in the process of Chinese students' English acquisition and even require students to "forget" about their mother tongue in English class to avoid the influence of their mother tongue, which will eventually lead to the loss of native culture in English teaching and in turn put Chinese students at a disadvantage in the future cross-cultural communication.

Another noteworthy fact is that all the texts in China's English textbooks of all levels are selected from the publications of English-speaking countries. Take the new edition of *College English (Integrated Course)* as an example. This series of textbooks, published first in 2001 by the Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, is one of the most widely used series of English textbooks in China. The whole series of teaching materials consists of 64 articles written by authors from the United States, Britain, Canada and Australia. But none of these articles has made any detailed descriptions or in-depth references to Chinese society or Chinese culture. In fact, they have just provided a window for Chinese students to learn about English society and English culture. Consequently, Chinese students will be in a dilemma when encountering the difficulty of introducing China in sound English in cross-cultural communication as they have never learned from the teaching materials English vocabulary and expressions describing or referring to China.

Apparently, judging from the setting of the communicative goals and the cultivation of communicative competence, Chinese English education gives high priority to the introduction and recognition of English culture while marginalizing Chinese language and culture. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Hu, 2013, p.141), language not only reflects the form of culture, but also partially or wholly determines people's view of the world. As for Chinese English learners and users, perceiving the world from the perspective of others can only bring about the replacement of their values with the values of others, which will make Chinese people lose their independent, equal status in cross-cultural communication and over time pose a great threat to the cultural security of China.

The notion of China English has appeared at the right time. Only the combination of the English language and Chinese culture may enable us to qualify for cross-cultural communication; only the identification with and pride taken in our native culture may enable us to communicate with others on an equal footing. It is also a nation's glory to promote themselves, to be understood by other nations, and reflect their own values. In view of this, when using English in the process of cross-cultural communication, Chinese English speakers do not have to blindly accommodate to the viewpoints or language expressions concerning Chinese culture of the westerners, which will firmly imprison their mind in the western mode of thinking. On the contrary, they should create and use unique English expressions with Chinese characteristics, under the premise of ensuring intelligibility and acceptability, for westerners to learn more about Chinese society and culture, which will undoubtedly benefit China's national cultural security.

## 2.2 China English and the Cultural Discourse Power

On the premise of comparing the traditional "hard power", namely such predominant power as economic, military and technological strength mainly, Nye (2005) creatively put forward the concept of "soft power" which is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies." Compared with the "hard power", "soft power" is more flexible and non-mandatory, thus more popular with western countries. Cultural discourse power is such a typical "soft power". The global cross-cultural communication is often carried out as the unequal communication, where the decisive factor is the economic strength of a country. In the era of economic globalization, the discourse power is dominated by the economic supremacy. English has become the world's lingua franca simply because the English speaking countries and their allies possess the greatest amount of wealth in the world and the most advanced science and technology, revealing the discourse power of English and creating the value system and civilization model of western centralism on the world stage. Taking their own national interests into account, non-English-speaking countries and individuals may survive and develop in the tide of economic globalization, only by cultivating enough English talents capable of talking to the world. A typical example is that the "English fever" is not only in China, but also common in many non-English-speaking countries and regions.

The owner-managers view his/her direct involvement in the informal HR processes as strength of the firm. This informal process is seen as giving the flexibility needed to attract key resources to the firm. One owner manager gave the example of when they attempted to recruit a

senior manager who would directly report to the owner-managers. The process involved a casual dinner with the candidate, during which the owners brought up the opportunity at their company. Such recruitment session is more of the start-up company selling their company to the candidate as opposed to the more traditional scenario where candidates convince companies of their capabilities. Start-up companies lack the brand name and market position to attract high calibre candidates. The owner managers have to literally convince the candidates of the companies' viability and long term growth prospective. Candidates would only join the start-up companies if they believe in the business model and the leadership of the owner managers. This is where the owner managers play a key role in recruiting key staff.

Similarly, China's economy has been developing rapidly and stably for more than two decades. China's GDP in 1990 was \$ 356.9 billion, while her GDP reached \$ 7 trillion in 2011, an increase of nearly 20 times. And in 2010 China replaced Japan to become the world's second largest economy. Under these circumstances, the craze for learning Chinese is heating up globally with an unprecedented increasing number of overseas Chinese learners. People of different skin colors and ethnical backgrounds from all over the world are challenging the "world's most difficult language" in the Confucius Institutes in their own countries or in Chinese universities. Apparently, the interest demands of people with different backgrounds have led to the appearance of "Chinese fever" and "English fever". And in cross-cultural exchanges, "Chinese fever" and "English fever" have highlighted the competition between China and the English-speaking nations for the cultural discourse power.

Due to historical reasons, English is the lingua franca of today's world and the main medium of intercultural communication. Western voices, mainly in English, are playing a leading role on the world stage is currently, and it is very difficult to change the dominance of the English cultural discourse. Meanwhile, with the growth of China's comprehensive national strength and the rise of China's international status, Chinese may also become an international language in the future, although currently the influence of the Chinese language in the world is still very limited. In this case, a feasible compromising solution to highlighting China's cultural discourse power is to use China English for the external introduction and dissemination of Chinese culture, complying with the international normative English rules, while "telling the Chinese stories and spreading the Chinese voices". China has never been completely described and introduced to the outside world in English before, which has resulted in the loss of China's international discourse power. The key is to "telling the Chinese stories and spreading the Chinese voices" lies in whether the audience is willing to listen and able to understand, and whether we can form a positive interaction and identify with each other.

Currently, climate change, financial security, global governance, network security, etc. have increasingly become topics of common concern around the world, and to solve these problems requires the joint efforts of the international community. We should use China English to present China's understanding, thinking and duties when confronted with humanity's common destiny and global affairs, and to seek the common discourse and the convergence of interests in the outside world. In addition, the issue of democracy and human rights, news management, ethnic and religious issues, judicial system and other social issues in China have long been concerned about by the outside world, where misunderstanding and prejudice prevail. Therefore, we should use the China English to better explain our situation, illustrate our stands, introduce our progress while listing the existing problems, and guide the international community to objectively and fairly recognize and treat these problems.

### **2.3 China English and the External Dissemination of Chinese Culture**

Cross-cultural communication in the world should be two-way and on an equal footing, including both the input of the target language culture and the output of the source language culture. As the developed countries, such as Britain and the United States, are holding the de facto international cultural discourse, China's current cross-cultural communication is in a state of cultural unfavorable balance, i.e. a soft power deficit. With the deepening two-way communication between China and the world, especially with the rapid development of China's economy and the rise of its international status, there is a pressing need for China to introduce and disseminate its outstanding cultural and technological achievements, showcasing the contemporary Chinese style. In 2011, then Chinese President Hu Jintao pointed out: "we should focus on spreading the Chinese culture to the world, forming the cultural soft power commensurate with China's international status and enhancing the international influence of Chinese culture." (Hu, 2011). From then on, the Chinese government has begun to pay more attention to the internationalization of Chinese culture by upgrading the external dissemination of Chinese culture as a national strategy and putting it into practice.

At present, the external communication of Chinese culture is mainly through two ways. First, Confucius Institutes are the main carrier of Chinese language education abroad. As of 2014, 475 Confucius Institutes have been established in 120 countries and regions, carrying out the Chinese language teaching and other forms of communication and cooperation.<sup>1</sup> With the increasing number of Confucius Institutes, the

<sup>1</sup> Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban). *About Confucius Institutes*. [Online]. Retrieved from [http://english.hanban.org/node\\_10971.htm](http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm)

international influence of Chinese language education keeps rising and more and more foreigners are coming into contact with Chinese culture and learning Chinese. As an important carrier of Chinese culture, Confucius Institutes have been developing and maturing in recent years, which provide a basis for the external communication of Chinese culture. Second, public diplomacy, mainly in the form of cultural diplomacy, is playing a more important role in spreading Chinese culture. Public diplomacy is a kind of diplomatic way to promote the international image and the international status of a country by means of cultural exchanges. Traditional public diplomacy is mainly based on government publicity, but the present public diplomacy has a richer connotation, involving the activities of governments as well as individual, social organizations, non-governmental organizations, etc.. Cultural diplomacy, as the main form of public diplomacy, is responsible for three purposes: To establish the country's image; to enhance its international status; to expand its international influence. In the process of peaceful rise, China needs to set up the image of a responsible country, strive for the discourse power on the global stage and facilitate the accurate understanding of China's foreign policies with the aid of public diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy is not only the main form of public diplomacy, but also an important carrier of the external dissemination of Chinese culture, which plays a vital role in spreading Chinese culture to the outside world.

Confucius Institutes in recent years have been developing rapidly, providing a platform for foreigners to learn Chinese language and culture and to understand the contemporary China. However, the acceptability and influence of Chinese can not be compared with English in the international area. Therefore, the external communication of Chinese culture is conducted mainly by means of cultural diplomacy using China English as the medium. It is one of the most important ways and methods to make accurate descriptions and introductions of Chinese cultural products in China English. Here, cultural products refer to both the narrow sense of cultural products, namely music, film, crafts and other products with Chinese cultural characteristics and the broad sense of cultural products, mainly reflected in the cultural ideas, cultural heritage of products and so on.

From a cultural point of view, many Chinese cultural products are unique, short of the corresponding English expressions, for there are wide differences between the east and the west. Therefore, the accurate translation of China's unique cultural products using China English is conducive to the spread of Chinese voice, the effective exchanges between China and the world, and the objective, rational understanding of China by the international community. At the same time, in the process of using English, we must fully reflect our own values, the actual situation in China and our standpoint in the

external communication, and strive for the corresponding cultural discourse power. The national culture integrating the deep national sentiment is the spiritual expectation of the people of every nation. The proactive translation of Chinese cultural products using China English is an effective attempt to inherit and develop Chinese national culture in the context of globalization.

## CONCLUSION

One of the consequences of the globalization of English is its localization. English and Chinese native culture combine to produce the corresponding English variety called China English. With normative English at the core, China English is used to express the unique things of Chinese society and culture. Meanwhile, language is power, and language is the material form of ideology. Where there are words, there is power. Power is the omnipresent dominant force of discourse. English is the lingua franca of today's world, the preferred language for cross-cultural communication. As a result, the English-speaking countries are in control of the discourse power in the international exchanges, resulting in the de facto inequalities between non-English-speaking and English-speaking countries. Though China's growing comprehensive national strength and rising international status indicate that Chinese may someday become an international common language, the influence of Chinese language in the world is still very limited at the moment, which makes the use of China English an indispensable choice to strengthen China's communication with different cultures. The promotion and use of China English are of great strategic significance to ensure the security of Chinese national culture, highlight the cultural discourse power of China and carry out the external dissemination of Chinese culture.

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