

## Counter the Fascism of English: A Study of the Dissemination of the Chinese Language From the Perspective of Language and Power

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### Abstract

Language is not just a means of communication, but also a symbol of power. On account of the dominance of English-speaking countries in modern times, English has become the lingua franca, the media of international exchanges and the carrier of multiculturalism. With the rising of China’s economy and its increasing international status, it has become imperative to ponder over how to inherit, develop and disseminate the Chinese language which carries the long history and culture of the Chinese nation in the context of the dominance of English, so as to enhance China’s cultural soft power and safeguard China’s discourse power. The protection of national languages as well as the proper treatment of English is a common responsibility and obligation of the whole international community. Globalization is not equal to unification of cultures. Multiculturalism is not just the basis of ecological development of human languages, but also a guarantee of inheriting and developing the diversity of human civilization.

**Key words:** Language; Power; Chinese; Communication; Multiculturalism

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### INTRODUCTION

The world today is in the process of globalization. For all nations around the world, not each of them has the equal discourse power in this “global village”. Just as Yan Ping comments, “we don’t opt for globalization, but live with it.” (Yan, 2009, p.614) Against the wave of globalization dominated by politics, economy and culture, the discourse power is gaining increasingly prominent importance. The cultural post-colonialism imposed by western developed countries on the disadvantaged countries has penetrated into the process of cultural globalization, and its cultural soft power has posed new challenges to the discourse power of the weak sovereign states. For them, to engage in the globalization process while at the same time maintaining their own sovereignty without being obscured by more powerful sovereign states has constituted a paradox (Hu, 2004). China’s economy ranks second in the world and its political influence is continuously on the rise, but its cultural discourse power on the world stage does not match its economic status. Therefore, it is of great practical significance to explore the relationship between language and power, understand the impact of English language’s dominating position on Chinese and explore the effective way of Chinese language dissemination and the construction of world multiculturalism in the context of globalization.

### 1. RELATION BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND POWER

Power involves people’s capacity of taking action in pursuit of their goals and interests, as well as the authority to control and dictate others and mobilize all sorts of resources (Xin, 2003). Professor Joseph Nye from Harvard University, after comparing the traditional “hard power”—dominant strength centering on economic, military and scientific power, put forward the creative idea about “soft

power". In his view, "soft power" represents the capacity of "satisfying one's desire by becoming attractive instead of using force or bribery. It originates from the attraction of a country's culture, politic notion and policy." (Nye, 2005, p.2) The reason why language becomes one of a country's soft and integrated powers has actually revealed language's key counterforce on thought and culture. Wilhelm von Humboldt, German linguist & philosopher and founder of general linguistics, first raised the question about the relation between language and world view. He believed that "every language contains a unique world view" (Humboldt, 1988, p.45). In Humboldt's view, the difference in language is not only about the difference between sound and symbols, but also about the difference in the world view itself. "Accepting a language means a cultural commitment—to accept a set of ways of thinking and values." (Palmer, 1983, p.115) It is precisely because language contains this special, irreplaceable cultural value and social function that it has always been an arena where fierce competitions for powers and interests take place. "The most subtle, least perceivable, and therefore the most irresistible way to oppress people is to execute language control and oppression." (Shen, 1992, p.23) The language control and oppression marks the establishment of ideology and cultural hegemony, and the start of ideological and cultural colonial movement. Language and ideology stay in pair to serve power, helping construct, maintain or disintegrate social power relations. Language is influenced by the power relations among social groups and affects such power relations in turn. Language is not an objective, transparent medium, as claimed by linguists in the past, but a social practice and intervention force of social process. Instead of simply reflecting the society, language is directly involved in social affairs and relations.

## 2. TRUTH OF ENGLISH HEGEMONY AND ADVERSITY FACED BY CHINESE LANGUAGE

### 2.1 Truth of English Hegemony

In fact, the decisive factor for a language to prevail across the world is not the language itself, but how important the native users are, and such importance is relative and subject to constant change. Only when a country is strong enough can its language gains a wide range of spread and usage. Latin had dominated for a thousand years because of the Roman Empire's formidability, and French had been popular throughout Europe for over two centuries due to the influence of bourgeois revolution. For over one century of colonial history, UK has laid the foundation for globalization of the English language, and America's economic power and scientific influence have helped spread the language of the world with an irreplaceable, dominant position.

Rolland Barthes noted when appointed as the academician of the Collège de France in January 1977, "Language is neither counter-revolutionary nor progressive, because it was originally fascist." (Gao, 2010, p.79) That's an implication that language represents power; it is a symbolic power and embodiment of power will, with irresistible, coercive force. Whoever faces language, whether in possession of power and status, must accept the fact that language exists, and bear all the objective forces caused by its existence and accept its control. It is in this sense that the language itself is equivalent to "fascism", regardless of how people see it, or whether they accept it or not; language has the power to conquer and dominate everything. In today's world, the dominance of English language is obvious and its influence is global. Functioning as a form of lingua franca, English is spreading, circulating and being used more widely than any other language. English today has become the most important common language in human history; it also has achieved the dominance of space and time (Hagege, 2015, p.79). "Almost all the points of view that you can imagine and all human emotions have been expressed in English. No other language can reflect the diversity of human experience so adequately" (De Swaan, 2002).

Any cultivated individuals worldwide who do not understand English will feel the pain of scarcity. Poverty and famine are certainly considered the most brutal and disgusting form of scarcity. When it is revealed only in a linguistic way, it escapes our notice. However, the scarcity is still evident. (Burchfield, 1985, p.15)

In general, how people accept a language depends on how they recognize the civilization of the country where it belongs, a reflection of the country's position and overall national strength in the world. At present, for their own survival and development, all countries worldwide are, consciously or unconsciously, choosing English as the communication tool, which has helped carry forward the English country's ideology and values to the world, in the form of English language, and reach in constant steps various corners of social life.

The position of English as a global language has brought strong impact to other languages and cultures, even leading to the disappearance of weak languages and cultures. Scholars like Robert Phillipson called this phenomenon "imperialism in the field of English language". English is not only a symbol, but a carrier of immense ideological and social ideology connotation. Robert Phillipson classified countries speaking English as the native language into core English-speaking countries, and countries speaking English as a second or foreign language into periphery English-speaking countries. On the basis of the analysis on the formation of English imperialism, he criticized some widely accepted creeds about English learning, and pointed out that these creeds, actually based on maintaining the control from the core English-speaking countries on the periphery English-

speaking countries, are the embodiment of Western Sino-West concept.

English imperialism has concealed its ideology, for the purpose of instilling Anglo-centrism, and adopting the language form and function in the core English-speaking countries as the standard for all language activities, and application of this standard would lead to the further expansion of English imperialism. (Phillipson, 2000, p.178)

This is particularly apparent when language imperialism has conquered another country or region in a country and then begins to impose its own language on the latter. The language or language variant that ultimately dominates may cause other languages or language variants to die away, and in the end, the dominating language would become favorable to some ways of thinking in a very subtle way and unfavorable to other ways; it would use the power classes or strong groups as the criteria to judge other groups, making the subordinate groups seem ordinary or marginalized, causing their ideologies and cultural traditions to disappear without a trace from the used language. In turn, its legitimacy and widespread use in daily linguistic communication would help some social groups strengthen and maintain their dominant position.

In the post-cold war era, the information revolution transferred the American economy to information economy, transformed the American media into a super media group, and led to an unprecedentedly massive global expansion by the medium of English language. Language, playing a salient role in American hegemony in that era, ultimately helped the country shift the focus from hard power in military, politics and economy to soft power in economy, science and culture. With this new hegemony, English language began to play a more important role in the international communication of information economy and American super media group and in the process of American-oriented cultural globalization. The early established English hegemony has resultantly become a soft-power-dominated hegemony.

## 2.2 Adversity Faced by Chinese Language

As the most preferred medium and international common language in intercultural communications, English has infiltrated all aspects of Chinese social and cultural life by relying on the strong political, economic and cultural strength of English-speaking countries, posing a serious threat to Chinese language itself and its social status.

First of all, Chinese language itself has been constantly subjected to the erosion of English, which has posed a threat to China's cultural security. With the globalization and informatization going deeper, English acronyms (or "letter words") have flocked to China's mass media, and at the same time permeated through all levels of social and cultural life, regardless of the profession, object and occasion, without translation and annotation, overused and in rapid expansion, depriving Chinese language of its purity and stability and bringing inconvenience to the

general public, e.g. NATO, VCD, VCR, OA, GDP, DIY, NBA, FIFA, CPI, MOOC, AQI, 4S, 3G, ATM, GPS, VIP, APP, IQ, EQ and F1 etc. Now film and television, newspapers, books and new media, and even the national regular publications and official documents, often prefer English acronyms to Chinese translation, a habit that contributes to the increasingly higher proportion of English in Chinese language. Therefore, General Administration of Press and Publication of China issued in 2010 the *Notice on Further Normalizing Publication Texts*, prohibiting free use of English words or acronyms and other foreign languages in Chinese publications. In the same year, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of China also issued a notice requiring radio and television agencies to further standardize terms in broadcast television programs, forbidding the use of English abbreviations (Gao, 2015). These laws and regulations on the application of Chinese characters are expected to curb the existing exclusion of Chinese characters in all areas of society and ensure the safety of Chinese characters.

Second, English has brought impact to Chinese language's social status. After the Opium War, as the western ideologies spread to China, English entered in the country too, listed as an educational subject in the period of National Government. After the founding of new China, English had been included into the subjects of examination, but with the impact of the Cultural Revolution, it fell into oblivion. As the reform and opening up policy orients China to the world again, English is also relisted as an examination subject. At present, the importance of English is exaggerated in the national education system and talented policy, and stiffened in the system. With the constant guiding and heating of public opinion, English has become a "VIP" in contemporary Chinese education and brought significant impact to the society. At the end of 2013, the Renmin University of China in Beijing decided to change a 5-year-long compulsory course University Chinese into an elective one, pushing the competition between Chinese and English languages to the cusp of public opinion, which focuses on the disadvantage of China's English education system: For years the exam-oriented education (which prefers reading to speaking) in China has distorted the true purpose for language learning, depriving language communication of its intrinsic function and delivering a multitude of groups who don't use English for almost their entire lives. Besides, the prominent role of English education has unbalanced the distribution of our limited educational resources, as students have to spare a good deal of their precious time to learn English, when they could have studied their major, Chinese language and culture. Since 2005, the Ministry of Education and State Language Commission have been issuing annual reports on language situation in China for 11 consecutive years. Among them, the *Report on Language Situation in*

*China* issued in 2010 particularly pointed out students' declining proficiency in Chinese language, accompanied by degradation of the native language education and their ability to write in Chinese and use the national language and text.

Over the last 20 years, China's economy has maintained high-speed, sustained and stable development, and replaced Japan as the world's second largest economy in 2010. Along with the opportunities brought by China's rapid development, there has been an increasingly heated trend of studying Chinese language and an unprecedentedly large number of learners, from ethnic Chinese, overseas Chinese to people of different skins and colors, from students of the "Confucius Institute" around the world to the large number of international students in colleges of China, who all wanted to challenge this "most difficult language in the world". The appeal of interest has led to the emergence of "Chinese language fever". Even so, in the context of economic globalization, the world's languages and cultures are competing against each other, and English and its culture have undoubtedly gained an upper hand. With the dissemination and use of English and worldwide spread of the values of English culture, the space, status and function of Chinese language are still in a weak position in the existing globalization context.

### 3. CHANNEL FOR CHINESE LANGUAGE DISSEMINATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF WORLD MULTICULTURALISM

#### 3.1 Channel For Chinese Language Dissemination

First, stick to correct view of language. "The difference between various human languages does not lie in the external voice and perceptual sign, or what they name a thing, but in their intrinsic form of view towards a certain thing, that is the world view." (Shen, 1992, p.63) Human being have a diversified system of world views and values, which make it impossible and unnecessary to use a common standard to measure the merits of different languages. The only reason is the group or population they belong to is relatively weak and forced to yield to stronger power. Intercultural communication across the world should be a two-way, equal process, including both the input of the target language culture and output of native culture. As developed countries like UK and US are holding the de facto international cultural discourse power, China's cross-cultural communication is currently in a cultural deficit state, in other word "soft power in the red". With the deepening of the two-way communication between China and the world, especially with the rapid development of China's economy and rise of its international status, China is in the urgent need of introducing and disseminating its outstanding cultural

and technological achievements overseas and displaying the contemporary Chinese features. When serving as the Chinese President in 2011, Hu (2011) pointed out, "We should focus on carrying forward the Chinese culture to the world, creating a cultural soft power in line with our international status and improving the international influence of Chinese culture."

Second, reject any extreme ideas about language. In the process of Chinese dissemination, two extreme ideas should be abandoned: Chinese inferiority theory and Chinese superiority theory. On the one hand, Chinese is by no means the so-called "inferior" language. That's not only because there is no such statement that "one human language is superior to another", but more importantly, for all Chinese people, Chinese language is evidence of the country's profound cultural heritage, a carrier and symbol of the Chinese national spirit; it is also the continuation of our five thousand years of cultural life and spiritual home that should be never abandoned. Placing our own language at a lower status is not necessary. On the other, with China's prosperity and emergence bringing about great opportunities, a global enthusiasm about Chinese language is frequently on the rise. Such "Chinese language fever" conveys a message that people across the world are eager to learn about Chinese culture. This old oriental language is no longer a mystery but sparkling with new vitality. It is indeed an exciting phenomenon, but once we jump to the conclusion that "Chinese will be universal language worldwide" or "the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be ruled by Chinese language", that would be a fanatical ethnocentrism. The language status is determined by the culture it represents and the influence it has or will have on the whole human social life. Only when a national language becomes the effective carrier of technology, life and work style, economic means and cultural exchange and is universally learned as a foreign language, will it be recognized by other peoples.

Third, formulate a national strategy to popularize Chinese language. Language popularization, part of a country's language policy, is the strategy adopted by a country or nation to, for its own benefit, expand its national language or drive language dissemination, and formulate some policy to consolidate its language position and speed up its language progress. The French sociologist Bourdieu (2005) pointed out "any language is produced by some symbol of power guaranteed by the state system." Therefore, language and cultural dissemination has been generally incorporated by the western countries into their national strategies. The combination of language and cultural popularization is the basic policy adopted by the developed countries for outward expansion. Many western countries are trying to penetrate their own values into other countries through language dissemination, with the view of enabling cultural infiltration and expansion and further promoting the tendency of global cultural convergence. At the national publicity & ideological work

conference in August 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping pointed out that we should strengthen the publicity reports on the development of the world situation changes, new situations and things in the world and new ideas, concepts and knowledge from all countries, so as to learn from the useful results of human civilization; and that we must carry out and innovate our external propaganda, strive to create the new concept, new scope and new statement connecting China with foreign countries, tell a good story about China and spread the voice of China (Xi, 2013). In the international exchanges, only when we have acquired the international discourse power and created the Chinese-style “new concept, new scope, new statement”, can we “tell a story about China and spread the voice of China”, telling China’s unique cultural traditions, historical destiny, basic national conditions, development road, and realizing the true sense of equality in cross-cultural communication.

Fourth, carry forward the external communication of Chinese culture by the medium of Chinese language. At present, Chinese culture largely depends on Confucius Institute for external communication. The Institute is established to teach Chinese language and carry out exchange and cooperation in Chinese and foreign education and culture. As of 2016, there have been 500 Confucius institutes, 1,000 Confucius classes and over 1.9 million registered students around the world, distributed in 134 countries and regions, with 40,000 part-time and full-time Chinese and foreign teachers employed (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2016). With the continuous rise in the number of the institute, Chinese education has gained increasing international presence. More and more foreigners are engaged in learning Chinese culture and language. After continuous development during the recent years of practice, Confucius Institute, as an important carrier for Chinese culture to “go international”, has provided the implementation basis and practical protection for external communication of Chinese culture. However, we must base the overseas popularization on the reality and only take the right action. It should be realized that the key to successfully popularizing Chinese language depends on whether the world could truly know about China, whether China could enhance its comprehensive national strength and status in international competition, whether Chinese language can get rid of the traditional communication mode and obtain a wide range of international recognitions by taking proactive measures like rules formulation, advanced technology and economic expansion.

At last, start active cultural diplomacy by the medium of Chinese language. Public diplomacy is a diplomatic way for a country to promote its own image through cultural exchange, so as to improve its international image and status. Traditionally, public diplomacy largely depends on government propaganda; in modern times, it contains much more significance, with the main

bodies involving individuals, social groups and non-governmental organizations apart from the government. Cultural diplomacy, as the main form of public diplomacy, serves three major purposes: Establish a country’s image; improve the international status; expand the international presence. In its peaceful development process, China needs to constantly establish the image as a responsible big country, strive for international discourse power, and strengthen foreign understanding of China’s policy. All these are to be completed through cultural diplomacy. The cultural diplomacy of China by the medium of Chinese language is not only the main form of its public diplomacy, but also an important carrier to spread Chinese culture and will play a vital role in carrying forward Chinese culture to the world. In a cultural sense, there are many differences between the East and the West, and many Chinese cultural products are unique. A national culture integrating deep national feelings is the spiritual expectation from people of each country, so the use of Chinese language to popularize China’s unique cultural products will help spread out China’s voice, facilitate a better communication and exchange with the world and encourage the international society to recognize China more objectively and rationally.

### 3.2 World Multiculturalism Construction

As professor Tan (2004) pointed out in,

Any civilization is an unconscious or conscious process of construction based on the interests and needs...In a general view, the construction of a civilization model is an unconscious process. How advanced the material civilization can be does not necessarily mean the spiritual civilization also gains the same advancement accordingly, and it doesn’t help if you try to force it to happen...However, the construction of spiritual and cultural model is a conscious process. It’s totally possible for people to make it a success by exerting a certain degree of their subjective initiative, depending on whether it goes in line with some interests and economic development. In this sense, it’s possible to build a civilization model, but the decisive success still depends on whether it meets the demand of interests.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the United Kingdom was the most powerful colonial nation in the world, and English was the “never-falling language” belonging to “the empire on which the sun never sets”; by the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United Kingdom became the country leading the world industrial revolution, and English was the carrier of advanced science and technology; in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States emerged to replace the United Kingdom as the world “magnate”. As a superpower, the United States has extended the influence of English to every corner of the world with its strong political, economic and cultural power. Therefore, the reason why English has become the world’s first common language is that the English-speaking countries are possessing the world’s largest amount of wealth and the most advanced technology, showing off the discourse power in English on the world

stage, and creating the value system and civilization mode of western centrism. According to the French linguist Hagege (2015, pp.1-2).

Diversity is essential in both living and non-living systems. ...The single linguistic form is a weak and weary consensus form...which identifies with the material advantages filled with illusory promises and the totally ready-made thinking models divorced from critical spirits, sober thought and creative meditation.

All human languages are produced from the historical development and different evolution processes. Therefore, no language should stand in the way of the road to development of other languages, trying to reject and strangle their advancement. The development of the world's language and culture should be oriented to diversification, rather than unification, otherwise the human thoughts would be trapped in the "English is the king" shackle and the anti-evolution cage.

Regarding other cultures, all countries should seek mutual respect and common ground while reserving the differences, instead of appealing to elimination and imposition. Different ethnic cultures should engage in an equal dialogue on a prejudice-free and fair basis, "recognize each other, and accept each other's perspective...learn the good from each other, and finally reach a "consensus on the basis of faith" (Habermas, 2002, p.148). The diversity of language and culture is not only the dream and expectation of mankind, but more importantly, we should take it upon ourselves to make it happen.

## CONCLUSION

Language is not just a communication tool, but a symbol of power. The spread of language depends on and also serves power. Because of the global dominance held by English-speaking countries since modern times, English has become the international common language and a carrier of multicultural media and multiculturalism. Currently, English is also an important means for countries around the world to strive for and maintain power in the international arena. In the globalization context, English as a powerful language has an increasing impact on other weak languages. English hegemony has been achieved at the price of loss of other languages. It's our shared responsibility and obligation to treat English language properly and protect our national language. Globalization is not identified with unification, and the diversity of world language is the foundation of the ecologically balanced development of human language, as well as the guarantee of the inheritance and development of diverse human civilization. With the emergence of China's economy and the increasing rise of its international status, how should we inherit, develop and spread Chinese language that carries a long history and culture of Chinese nation, enhance China's cultural soft power and maintain

China's discourse power in the English-dominated global environment is a question to be pondered over.

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