

Book Review

English as a Global Language in China: Deconstructing the ideological discourses of English in language education

Lin Pan. New York: Springer, 2015. 189 pp. ISBN: 978-3-319-10391-4

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This book takes an in-depth look at the notion of English as a global language within the context of China. Why a language becomes global has little to do with the number of people who speak it, but a lot to do with who those speakers are (Crystal, 2003). English has become the most widely taught foreign language throughout the world, even though Chinese is spoken by the greatest number of people in the world. In 2001, English was made one of the main compulsory subjects in China from the third year of primary schools onwards. The cult of English, or “English mania” has swept through China over the past 30 years. However, there seems to be a decline in the grasp of English in the context of globalization. Against this backdrop, this volume thoroughly investigates the English language ideologies and the foreign language education policies in China, supported by copious empirical data.

Chapter 1 provides a clear overview of the main issues in English education in China, the major theories, and the research methods. Chapter 2 lays the theoretical foundations for the discussions which follow by unfolding the different approaches to globalization. Pan has critically reviewed Immanuel Wallerstein’s macro-social inquiry method, i.e. the world-systems analysis, which serves as a necessary tool to examine the powerful transnational forces that have played a key role in China’s social, economic and ideological transformations (p.27). The schools of thought on the cultural impact of globalization and the tensions among them are also presented. Chapter 3 offers an insightful political analysis of language ideologies and the different understandings of “Global English”. As Pan suggests, language policies cannot be understood without considering the role of ideology from a local perspective (p.32).

In this vein, Pan presents a substantial picture of the ideologies in language education in China using an innovative temporal-spatial analytical framework, incorporating the diachronic and synchronic approaches. Adopting a diachronic perspective, Chapter 4 provides a comprehensive historical review of the changes of language education ideologies in China, the economic and socio-political development of the country, and the complex relationships between the two. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 report the synchronic analysis of English language ideologies and language policies in contemporary China. According to Pan, the state’s language policies are an apparatus for its political and

cultural governance, which also manifest how it acts and responds to the interconnected modern world system (p.79). She concludes that the spread of English in China is a two-way absorption rather than a one-way diffusion (p.96), while China's foreign language education policies function as a mechanism for the state authorities to guarantee its cultural governance (p.97).

Apart from the sound theoretical base and comprehensive historical accounts, one striking feature of this volume is its rich documentation of the empirical data collected from a variety of sources. The question of how far policies can be implemented is further discussed in Chapter 6 via discourse analysis. The participants were 637 university students and 117 English teachers at primary schools, middle schools and universities in Beijing. Questionnaires and face-to-face interviews were conducted to investigate their views of the status of English, the objectives and standards of English teaching and learning, and the issues of culture, choice and inequality.

The English language ideologies at the non-institutional level are reported in Chapter 7, including the reasons for learning English and its influence on the general public. The data was collected via interviews and group discussions when Beijing was hosting the 2008 Olympic Games. The extract analyses are characterised by clarity and reliability with constant reference to both linguistic and socio-cultural theories and the current situation of Chinese society. Nevertheless, considering the huge population, diverse ethnic groups and different development levels in the vast land, people's attitudes towards English learning are worth further investigation.

This book is a valuable resource for language policymakers, educators, and English learners in China, who can be inspired to conceptualize English language education according to the country's strategic plans in the 21st century (p.159). For those who hope to understand the underlying socio-cultural and political impact of language education ideologies in the context of globalization, this is also a must read.

As pointed out by the author, the tortuous path of evolution of foreign language policies reflects not only linguistic diversification, but also social stratification and power disparities. To many Chinese people, English is a language of modernization and economic development (p.164). With the Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2015, the number of Mandarin-Chinese learners all over the world has steadily increased. How this phenomenon will change the notion of "English as a global language" in an increasingly globalized China and beyond remains to be seen.

About the reviewer

Janet Zhang is an English Teaching Assistant in the Centre for Applied English Studies at The University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include bilingualism, metalinguistic awareness, and motivation.

References

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