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STATE OF THE ART OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION
IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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(These findings are the result of a two-month investigation by the author while in the People's Republic of China in Fall 1981.)

The current state of the art of foreign language education in the People's Republic of China must be viewed against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution, which so profoundly affected every facet of Chinese life for an entire decade (1966-1976). As a result of the destructive influence of the Gang of Four during this period, young people were turned radically against education, became activist Red Guards, and stopped studying. All Chinese universities were closed down, and the students and teachers were sent for "re-education" to the country.

Teachers in general, and foreign language teachers in particular, suspected of being tainted by the wicked ways of the West, became special targets of the young revolutionaries. Many were subjected to all manner of humiliation such as the degradation of endless written self-criticism, public revilement in theatrical trials, and assignments to such de-meaning tasks as cleaning toilets and vegetable storage cellars. Some of them, seeing no hope for the future, committed suicide.

The physical facilities of schools and universities were no longer properly maintained, some buildings having been converted into prisons for the "counter-revolutionary" faculty. Many books, instruments, and much equipment were wantonly destroyed. Research came to a standstill. Foreign language teacher training, along with that in many other disciplines, was abolished.

Although a number of universities were permitted to re-open several years later, standards were low since a requirement was established that students be drawn from workers, peasants and soldiers. The academic period of four years was shortened to three, and the curriculum was loaded with a preponderance of political indoctrination courses. A number of the present-day foreign language teachers are products of this diluted program and are currently faced with the difficult task of making up their cultural and academic deficiencies.

With the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the overthrow of the Gang of Four, the dark decade of the Cultural Revolution came to a close, and schools, colleges, and universities began reopening. The intellectual stagnation of this sterile period gave way to a revival of interest in things foreign, including foreign language study. The development of relations with other countries created a desperate need to produce linguists. The establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States, with its attendant development of economic and cultural ties served to intensify the sense of urgency to learn English--which continues undiminished to the present. This is evidenced not only by the large number of students currently studying the language in secondary

schools and institutions of higher learning, but by those pursuing English courses via television, radio and self-study. A working knowledge of English has become the touchstone for getting ahead and represents modernization in its most pragmatic form. Furthermore, as one observer commented, it is a constructive way to fill the great patches of boredom that go along with too big a population and too little entertainment.

In its goal to create in the shortest possible time an instructional system to teach languages to a large number of students, the PRC found itself faced not only with the task of training new teachers and upgrading the competency of the poorly prepared ones, but also of influencing pre-Cultural Revolution teachers to break with old traditions and to substitute modern techniques for their antiquated pedagogy. Given the natural resistance to change inherent in the teaching profession, this was perhaps the most formidable task facing the institutions.

Other serious problems were the critical shortage of up-to-date textbooks and audio-visual equipment, and the need to refurbish and repair run-down buildings. The latter are still visible testimony of the total neglect of education by the government during the Cultural Revolution. Many teachers now needed to go abroad to enhance their linguistic and cultural knowledge and acquaint themselves with the latest teaching techniques, trends, equipment, and textbooks. Foreign experts in teaching methodology needed to be brought in to serve as resource persons and to assist in modernizing language programs. In short, the academic windows needed to be opened and fresh air let in. Let us see what the People's Republic of China has done to meet these problems during the past five years.

Foreign Language teaching methodology courses are now offered in a number of institutions of higher learning, but primarily in normal colleges and universities. Several prominent universities still do not offer foreign language teacher training programs. Some educators believe that developing language proficiency is more important than methodology training.

Methodology courses are usually of one semester duration, meeting two hours per week. The consensus seems to be that they are rather dull and devoid of significant practical work. The extent of student teaching experience fluctuates widely, ranging from one month to six weeks, teaching one to six classes per week, and attending student teacher seminars and discussion groups. Student teaching is supervised by the college or university supervisor on a regular basis.

Students have no assurance that they will be assigned as foreign language teachers after graduation. Some are placed as interpreters and translators in industry or government. They are not offered a choice and stoically accept whatever position the government assigns them to.

There is no specialization for teaching foreign languages in the elementary schools. In fact, foreign languages (usually English) are taught at only a few such schools and only in the large cities, and there are

no plans to expand the program.

The Ministry of Education estimates it will take 50 years to meet all the foreign language teacher shortages.

Foreign language teachers are brought in from the provinces to several central locations for a period of several months intensive in-service training in methodology. Nankai University (Tianjin) has its own four-month's in-service training program taught by four faculty from Temple University. Special clinics conducted by faculty from abroad are also held in central locations, usually during the summer.

From 20 to 25 percent of foreign language faculty are sent abroad for study and experience. There is no provision for sending undergraduate or graduate students abroad, however.

Since only four percent of high school graduates can be accommodated in any one year in the colleges of the PRC, there is a stiff entrance examination. This test was restored throughout the country in 1977, and has a foreign language portion which had in the past been given a weight of 50 percent. Present plans are to raise this to 100 percent.

Both the Bachelor of Arts and the Bachelor of Science degrees now require two years of a foreign language.

The foreign language curriculum varies with the institution. A wide spectrum of languages (totalling 15), including Chinese as a second language is offered by the Beijing Language Institute, with fewer languages available at other institutions.

English is predominant, with Japanese second, followed by French, German and Spanish. Russian is one of the least popular, and many Russian teachers are being reprogrammed into other languages. First choice of a language is dependent on government needs, both local and national. Students generally take a second foreign language.

While even the B. A. degree is still in the planning stage in certain institutions, M. A. and Ph. D. degrees are offered in others, but only on a limited basis at present.

The average class size is 15 in the universities and often in excess of 50 in the elementary schools.

There is an acute shortage of suitable up-to-date foreign language textbooks. Most of the English materials are of British origin, and although based on sound pedagogical principles, they are somewhat outdated and contain a good deal of typically British vocabulary and stilted pronunciation which the students imitate to perfection.

The Beijing Language Institute has been very active in the field of textbook preparation and has produced some excellent up-to-date materials, particularly for teaching Chinese as a second language. Many universities have replaced their obsolete jury-rigged audio equipment with modern Japanese language labs and classroom units.

Modern duplicating machines are still rare in China and reproduction of material can be rather tedious. Good quality overhead projectors, made in China, exist, but are not yet widely used.

One American observer likened the Chinese classroom to the old one-room schoolhouse--desk for two, backless bench, all lined up in straight rows facing the teacher, who stands on a small platform behind a podium. On rare occasions one sees desks arranged in a semicircle. Classrooms and hallways are often shabby, poorly illuminated, and in various stages of disrepair.

Housing in the form of apartments is available on campus for most of the faculty and staff. Furnishings are spartan, however.

Students at all levels appear to be highly motivated, very bright, and extremely conscientious. They carry 20 hours and have only one purpose: to study. This is particularly true at the university level where the students represent the cream of the crop of the high school graduating classes by reason of the rigid entrance examination. Students have few distractions, and although they are crowded into dormitories, with no privacy, they accept these conditions realizing that they have no alternative, and that, after all, they are better off than they would be at home.

Eager to learn, they fully realize the primary purpose of learning a language: to communicate, and they seize every opportunity to practice the foreign language, speaking without any hesitancy to any susceptible foreigner. The quality of the spoken language is surprisingly good and imitative ability is amazing.

There are no disciplinary problems at any level.

Despite the fact that no faculty studied abroad during the Cultural Revolution and only a relatively small percentage have had the opportunity since 1976, foreign language teachers speak with surprising fluency and correctness and generally are well grounded in the culture of the language. There is keen competition for the limited number of vacancies to go abroad.

The average teaching load is 5-6 hours a week, except for younger faculty who teach up to 10 hours.

A total of 70 faculty from foreign countries, referred to as "foreign experts," are employed by the PRC as teachers of their native language and of certain specialities in a number of key Chinese universities. They have a teaching load of around 16 hours.

Department chairmen are appointed for life and have no fixed retirement age.

The quality of foreign language teaching methodology in the PRC, as in the United States, varies with the teacher and with the opportunity to learn proper techniques. As pointed out above, foreign language teaching methodology courses--where they exist--leave much to be

desired. Many progressive teachers have been exposed to any of a number of approaches but are in a quandary as to which one to adopt. Most of them agree that the old grammar translation technique is outmoded and ineffective and that regardless of the approach used the ultimate goal should be to develop communicative competence.

Direct observation of a broad spectrum of foreign language teaching at levels ranging from elementary school to universities, in cities extending from Beijing and Tianjin in the north to Guangzhou (Canton) in the south and Kunming in the southwest, revealed that many teachers followed sound pedagogical practices. These provided for maximum student involvement and student-generated activities, with a variety of imaginative communicative exercises. Major shortcomings were the inability of some teachers to keep in the target language, the predominance of teacher-talk over student-talk, the complete absence or lack of a variety of visual aids, the encouragement of rote memorization, and at advanced levels the proclivity to use the tradition-bound lecture technique.

In China's national push for modernization there is much evidence that foreign language educators are making a concerted effort to modernize foreign language teaching methods. In this endeavor they are taking an eclectic approach as they study techniques employed in Europe and the United States. They appear to be aware of the need to break old traditions while modernizing techniques and up-grading teaching materials. Barring another Cultural Revolution or other major political upheavals, the People's Republic of China could become recognized as one of the leaders in foreign language teaching methodology before the turn of the century.