

Foreign Language Education Planning in China Since 1949: A Recurrent Instrumentalist Discourse

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Foreign language education planning (FLEP) has been caught in the political turmoil and hustle of ongoing economic reform in the People's Republic of China for several decades. This paper situates a recurring instrumentalist discourse of FLEP in China in the underlying language ideologies and historical contexts from 1949 to present day. Utilizing Cooper's (1989) guiding question of "who makes what decisions, why, how, under what conditions, and with what effect?" (p. 88), this paper examines the decision-making process in language planning across several decades. A discussion of the repercussions of this instrumentalist approach to FLEP in different time periods in China calls attention to the difference and significance between treating language as a tool and as a resource (Ruiz, 1984, 2010).

Over the past six decades since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC),¹ the imperative of modernization as well as the maintenance of the legitimacy of China's Communist Party (CCP) have shaped a new sociopolitical environment that has given rise to the expansion of foreign language education, which is a relatively new component of education in China (Fu, 1986). The historical development of foreign language education planning (FLEP) in the PRC is profoundly influenced by China's previous and current interactions with foreign countries as well as by language ideologies that are commonly observed in other countries.

It was not until the second half of the 19th century, when the feudalist Qing government in China was bullied by Western imperial powers, that the government started to embrace the modern idea of diplomacy and was forced to open up to more interaction with foreign cultures (Zhang & Xu, 2007). Under these circumstances, the reformists in the government initiated a self-strengthening movement despite the resistance from the conservatives who were afraid of cultural infiltration. Resources were deployed to raise foreign language skills so that China could access modern science and technology required for producing firearms or ships to defend its sovereignty (Li, Zhang, & Liu, 1988). One of the leading reformists, Zhang Zhidong, proposed the idea of "Chinese learning / values for foundational principles, Western learning for practical uses" (中学为体, 西学为用)² (Zhang, 1898) in order to ease the

¹ PRC refers to China from 1949 to the present when it is under the governance of the CCP only. China is used interchangeably with PRC during this period in this paper. When talking about other historical periods during which China was not yet the PRC, China and more specific description are used.

² All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

conflicts between reformists, who advocated emulating western industrialization, and conservatives, who feared the loss of Chinese language and values. The role and status of foreign languages were cautiously defined assuming that languages could be acquired as technical tools detached from their cultural connotations. This idea also alluded to the potentially rival ideologies embedded in Chinese and foreign languages, which reflected the relationship between feudalist China and industrialized western countries at that time.

This language-as-tool discourse (Ruíz, 2010), which I will term an *instrumentalist view*, is not unique to the Qing Dynasty. In fact, the wax and wane of this instrumentalist view of foreign languages and the fear of cultural infiltration manifested in China's FLEP have accompanied the demise and formation of different governments up to the 21st century. By tracing changes in FLEP from 1949 to present day, this paper examines the sociopolitical contexts and language ideologies that have given rise to different manifestations of the instrumentalist orientation to FLEP in China. Specifically, I explore the extent to which an instrumentalist orientation to FLEP might seem inevitable in the PRC, and what implications this orientation might have for future FLEP.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts a critical historical-structural approach (Tollefson, 1991) to examining the sociopolitical contexts and language ideologies that have given rise to different FLEP after the founding of the PRC. This analysis is divided into three periods characterized by distinct FLEP: I call these the Politicized Era (1949–1976), the Reform Era (1978–2002), and the Transition Era (2003–present). The analysis of each period includes the repercussions of instrumentalist-oriented FLEP and explores an alternative orientation to FLEP.

Before doing a historical account of FLEP in contemporary China, and to assist the discussion of the formation and repercussion of FLEP in each period, I will review the concept of language ideology, which is one of the driving forces behind language policy. The interaction of language ideology with cultural and national identity is often elusive (Blommaert, 2006) but is foregrounded in propaganda for FLEP in my analysis. To start with, concepts of *language belief* (Spolsky, 2004), *language attitude* (Ruíz, 1984), and *linguistic culture* (Schiffman, 2006) have paid attention to the role of language ideologies in language planning and policy scholarship. Spolsky (2004) broadly defines language ideology as “a speech community’s consensus on what value to apply to each of the language variables or named language varieties that make up its repertoire” (p. 14), and Ruíz (1984) further specifies three fundamental orientations toward language that give rise to various language attitudes: language-as-problem, language-as-right, and language-as-resource. Ruíz (1984) further posits that “orientations determine what is thinkable about language in society” (p. 16), be it high or low. In responding to the ineffective measures for minority language planning derived from the first two orientations (such as transitional bilingual programs), he advocates planning with the orientation of language-as-resource in order to mitigate the marginalization of minority languages and the hostile or condescending attitudes toward the speakers.

However, over the past few decades since Ruíz (1984) called for this resource-oriented approach, many scholars (e.g., Ricento, 2005) have critiqued it on the

ground that this orientation suggests an economic explanation, or at least that it prompts an exceedingly narrow, instrumentalist interpretation that exacerbates social inequality. I find the critique undue. Fishman (1974) pointed out “language is certainly an odd kind of resource...precisely because of the difficulty in measuring or separating ‘it’ from other resources” (p. 83). Therefore policy makers’ narrow definition of language as one particular type of resource (e.g., nationalist or economic) does not mean that the language-as-resource approach per se is instrumentalist. A policy that promotes a foreign language (e.g., English in China) does not always affect people’s daily lives as much and fast as policies that promote a second language (e.g., Spanish for indigenous groups in Latin American countries, Hornberger, 1988). Even if policy makers selectively prioritize one or two of the dimensions of the linguistic resource, this instrumentalist move may not receive much resistance from the public, as it does not cause any immediate oppression or loss. Instead, the presumed benefits of FLEP, which are usually economic, are often foregrounded in national propaganda and echoed by similar FLEP in other countries. Therefore, the delayed aftermath of these policies, such as deepened social inequality, should not be attributed to the orientation that treats languages as resources but to the way these resources are improperly appropriated. In responding to the critique of his language-as-resource concept, and in the hope of positively informing language planning, Ruíz (2010) leads us to focus on the elaboration of a more comprehensive understanding of this orientation, which values “cultural, social, political, academic and economic” resources (p. 162). Imposing one or two dimensions of a language-as-resource orientation while neglecting others may turn the resources into burdens for individuals and for the country’s development, as is demonstrated in this paper. Before using the PRC case to illustrate this, I will reflect on two fundamental ideologies (Blommaert, 2006; Kroskrity, 2000) that constitute the launching pad for this seemingly irresistible instrumentalist orientation in the PRC’s FLEP: (1) the relationship between language forms and culture is ambivalent and they can be separated for some purposes; (2) there exists a monolingual nation with a homogeneous culture.

The Ambivalent Relationship Between Language Forms and Culture

In the example of FLEP in the Qing Dynasty mentioned above, the compromise that was reached between the conservatives and the reformists in the Qing government indicates two paradoxical beliefs about language. On the one hand, the conservatives were concerned about cultural threat or invasion in the process of importing foreign languages, indicating a perception that cultures and languages are inextricably intertwined. On the other hand, however, their acceptance of applying foreign languages only for practical uses seems to imply that they find it possible to separate language from other contextual factors (Li et al., 1988). This elusive linguistic paradox did not only affect laymen, it has also prompted divergence among generations of linguistics scholars in how they interpret their research across diverse ideologies of languages. Kroskrity (2000) divides these linguists into two groups: those who adopt a formal model and focus on linguistic structure and its referential function, and those who adopt a semiotic-functional model and recognize the importance of the relationship between language forms and the context of their use. Although

the former recognize the “ideas, values, beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, myths, religious strictures and all the other cultural ‘baggage’” in linguistic cultures (Schiffman, 2006, p. 112), they find them distracting and dismiss them in their analyses as the native speaker’s “false consciousness” (Kroskrity, 2000, p. 6). The latter, however, include in their analyses both the indexical connections between language and context, and their value and necessity.

While the separation of forms and culture seems unproblematic for many linguistic scholars, in reality there is no clear-cut boundary. If one assumes that the conservatives in the Qing government adopted the idea that forms can be separated from culture, since they allowed foreign language learning for access to modern science, the fear of cultural invasion seems incongruent. However, the question here is not whether language forms are detachable or not, but rather whether the decision to exploit linguistic forms as tools is viable in the long run for the PRC. In addition, to evaluate a FLEP, it is also crucial to realize that these two elusive, paradoxical beliefs about language very often coexist in people’s minds and in policies.

The Illusion of the Monolingual Nation and Homogenous Culture

In addition to the tendency to wobble between decontextualized language forms and a comprehensive view of language, another fundamental thought that makes the instrumentalist orientation possible is what Blommaert (2006) calls the “monoglot idealization of the link ‘language-people-country’” (p. 244). In the case of the PRC, this would be *Chinese people speak Chinese*: the one and only traditional Chinese culture is built upon this unifying language, and language and culture are indispensable in forming national identity. Although fifty-three out of the fifty-six recognized ethnic groups in China have their own languages, they are not seen as being qualified to represent Chinese identity in many people’s minds. Even among the Han—the largest and most multilingual ethnicity—only the language of Mandarin Chinese is selected to symbolize national unity (Zhou, 2000). Though there are so many layers of filtering to do before arriving at this monoglot idealization, it is often uncritically accepted.

This phenomenon is not cultural or recent: Bauman and Briggs (2003) trace this language ideology back to John Locke and Johann Herder, two Enlightenment philosophers. The former promoted the idea that one particular rational, decontextualized language was suitable for a nation’s endeavors for modernity while the latter found that one particular folk culture should be considered representative of the national character. These two philosophers make salient the connection between national identity, language, and culture. Kroskrity (2000) critically points out that although Locke highlighted language and Herder highlighted culture, both philosophers were defending the interest of their own classes. Similarly, in China’s case, Mandarin Chinese and its traditional culture have been strategically chosen to represent the nation while minority and regional languages are considered to be in a competing relationship with this official language. While minority languages are allowed to be taught and preserved, the country’s imperative to strengthen national identity has reduced the extent to which they are tolerated (Zhou, 2000). China’s monoglot ideology, though it does not hold water upon close examination, has sedimented in history through

repeated implementations and has fueled problematic nativist and purist language ideologies in modern society.

In the same vein, in foreign language policy making, a nationalist train of thought often presumes a one-to-one correspondence between standard language and national culture when applied to a foreign country. Though the fallacy in this ideology is more easily detected today as people enjoy greater mobility, the nationalist arguments are still capable of striking a chord due to longstanding monoglot idealization. Ricento (2000) summarizes that “ideologies of language are linked to other ideologies that can influence and constrain the development of language policies” (p. 4). In this sense, the same language can be deemed both the legacy of colonialism and the hallmark of modernity depending on a country’s socio-historical context. In the case of the Qing government, foreign languages were associated both with the imperialist power that the government wanted to resist and with the modernization which it desperately craved. This apparent dilemma, based on the unfounded one-to-one correspondence between language, culture, and national identity, took for granted that acquiring a foreign language posed a threat to native culture.

In order to tease apart these intertwined ideologies and evaluate their impact on language policies, Blommaert (1999, as cited in McGroarty, 2010) suggests looking at three dimensions: historicity, materialism and verifiable reproducibility. In other words, he calls attention to the historical, socio-political environment in which ideologies are formulated, disseminated and received. Since making policy for foreign language education, especially one designed for the masses, is not obligatory for a nation, the decision itself is an intentional planning effort by the government for whatever goals might be on their agenda. Similarly, Cooper (1989) developed a specific language planning question generated from decision-making theory in political science: “Who makes what decisions, why, how, under what conditions, and with what effect?” (p. 88) In the following account of FLEP in contemporary China, I use Cooper’s question as a heuristic to present a historical review foregrounding the power and the ideologies of the CCP at play, as well as the repercussions of crafting FLEP with an instrumentalist orientation. The following paragraphs will be structured around aspects of this question as a means of examining the formulation, implementation, and repercussions of FLEP in the PRC across three political periods described below.

FLEP in Contemporary China

Scholars both in China and abroad (e.g., Adamson 2004; Fu 1986; Li & Xu 2006; Li et al., 1988) have contributed to the field of language policy and planning with extensive historical accounts of China’s FLEP from different perspectives and with varied demarcation of historical periods. In the following section, I divide the historical and the current FLEP into three periods based on the main ideologies that govern FLEP in those periods: Politicized Era (1949–1976), Economic Reform Era (1978–2002), and Transition Era (2003–present). Ross (1992) eloquently states that

[b]ecause foreign language education tests the limits of what is considered acceptable levels of cooperation with foreign countries, it can be viewed as a barometer of China’s modernization trends: registering high

when open participation in the global community is perceived to be commensurate with political and economic interests, low when foreign influence is viewed as threatening to political stability and cultural integrity. (p. 240)

This metaphor accurately describes the first two periods when FLEP was utterly instrumentalist as it was bundled up with political and economic imperatives recognized by the CCP government. While the ties have been loosened in the most recent period, it is still undetermined as to whether FLEP in China can entirely get away from an instrumentalist orientation.

Politicized Era (1949–1976)

This highly politicized period stemmed from the domestic political imperative to strengthen the regime of the communist government and its changing diplomatic relations with countries of different political orientation. FLEP in China was entangled in political turmoil, with the goals of foreign language education, language choice, and textbook production subject to China's relationship with foreign countries, as well as its constant need to strengthen communism and prevent the infiltration of capitalism. Foreign languages were still associated with the science and technology necessary for nation building, but some were treated with caution due to their association with capitalist countries.

Conditions. After the PRC was founded in 1949, the status of the new ruling party, the relatively young CCP, was not stable. It feared any resurgence of other political powers that would take over its current position, or at least make it harder to focus on nation building. This instability and insecurity were reflected by the frequent domestic political movements that swung back and forth between the leftists and rightists (Adamson, 2004). For the first few years after the PRC was founded (1951–1956), the CCP was active in purging their potential opponents. Meanwhile, communism continued to be a political orientation firmly adopted by the whole nation; ideological control was tight. A short-lived invitation for criticism and different voices from intellectuals was quickly ended by the anti-rightist movement (1957–1959) that ironically targeted people who had responded to the invitation and voiced their critique on the CCP's governance before. The radical ten-year Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) that featured a witch-hunt of anti-communists brought education at every level to a halt, undoing any progress that had resulted from a few good prior decisions. In short, during the Maoist period, political activity was inescapable for anyone in daily life, but it was difficult to align with the right side since what was considered politically correct was in constant change (Spence, 1982).

The domestic political climate was aggravated by political tension internationally. The world was polarized by the Eastern Bloc of communist countries and the Western Bloc of capitalist countries. China, ruled by the CCP, joined the Eastern Bloc and received financial and technical assistance from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) while it was subject to an economic blockade by the United States. Although China was impoverished at that time, it was an adamant upholder of communist beliefs and still assisted other communist powers in their civil wars (such as the Vietnam War and the Korean War against the United States). However, China's schism with the USSR in the early 1960s pushed

China to expand its diplomatic relations with other countries in the world by sending aid while making more efforts in domestic economic development, despite its inexperience. It kept the same command economy inherited from the USSR: the central government made all decisions while officials at provincial and lower levels had little influence over policy making. This lack of checks and balances in the decision-making system put China at a disadvantage, with its decision to invest in heavy industry over agriculture finally leading to the largest famine in China's history.

Actors. Due to the centralized, authoritarian political system, all decisions were made by the Ministry of Education within the central government. However, there was no specific institution under the ministry designated with the responsibility of making policies for foreign language education (Hu, 2001). Therefore, policies were very sensitive to changes in the political climate. In addition, there was no long-term planning regarding the role of citizens' foreign language proficiency for the nation's overall development, which could have cushioned the political influence. People's Education Press, directly led by the Ministry of Education, was the main publisher that designed and published the textbooks for foreign language education. Some areas, such as Shanghai, were allowed to have their own textbooks as long as they followed the spirit of the national policies.

Decisions. During the first seven years after the PRC was founded, Russian was needed to access the science and technology that was only available from China's ally, the USSR. Due to sharing the same political orientation, the promotion of Russian was not considered an ideological threat. Therefore, Russian was chosen over any other foreign language to be included in education, and several working conferences and directives were hosted and issued to promote Russian teaching (Fu, 1986). English was only tolerated if a school did not have the capacity to offer Russian. However, by the mid-1950s, due to the lack of long-term planning, there was an overflow of Russian-speaking talents and a lack of speakers of other foreign languages, especially English, a language that also provided access to science and technology. In response to this, from 1956 to 1957, English curricula for high school and middle school were introduced. Due to the schism between China and the USSR, Russian fell out of favor while English continued to replace it, carrying increasing weight in foreign language education at primary and secondary levels. In 1964, the Seven-Year Plan for Foreign Language Education (Li et al., 1988) was promulgated, officially spelling out that English was the most important foreign language and that the ratio of English to Russian as the choice of foreign language education was to be gradually increased. In addition, this plan also included other measures to develop foreign language education, but all these potentialities were disrupted by the Cultural Revolution.

Besides the choice of language, the content of the textbooks published by the People's Education Press was highly politicized and consistent with the change of political climate in China. Adamson (2004) analyzes the content of English textbooks published by People's Education Press since Series 1 in 1957, scanning for political message³, the proportion of which is included and presented in Figure 1. During 1957–60 and 1966–76, when political movements were at their peak, the

³ In Adamson (2004), three major categories (political, moral, and nil) and three minor categories (attitudes, information, and role model) further differentiating the genres of political messages were used to code the content of the textbooks.

political message in the textbooks exceeded 90% (Adamson, 2004). Even during 1961–65, when more focus was on economic development so that the nation could recover from the deadly famine, the proportion of political message was still quite high. The concurrence of the highly politicized English textbooks and the political movements is not a mere coincidence. In 1958, Party leaders such as Mao were concerned that political transmission in education was not sufficient (Adamson, 2004). The Communist government promulgated an educational principle emphasizing that “education should be combined with the Proletarian’s political, education and working needs” (Fu, 1986, p. 74). The goal of education, according to this principle, was for people to be both “red” (politically correct and active) and “experts” (high command of subject matter) (Li & Xu, 2006). For foreign language education specifically, this goal was translated into an increase of political and practical content and a de-emphasis on Western literature for fear of capitalist sentiment. The political message in textbooks thus served as a constant reminder that a patriotic Chinese person only learns the language forms necessary for nation construction and acceptable political activities. English was therefore considered a “desirable evil” (Adamson & Morris, 1997, p. 25). Unfortunately, however, the need for “red” was usually played to the extreme and the highly politicized textbooks (whose content was mainly political propaganda) made the need for “experts” in foreign languages impossible.

As discussed earlier, in language policies, language ideologies are often intertwined with other ideologies. During the Maoist period, the communist government needed foreign languages for nation building, but as a party-state, it also feared dissenting political opinion. The former motivated the CCP to set up foreign language education which taught language as an isolated tool, and the latter reveals their concern that English would introduce undesirable capitalist or bourgeois thoughts that would erode people’s minds and the communist regime. This reflects the CCP’s deep-seated concerns about the one-to-one link of language-culture-national identity, even though languages contain much unexplored richness besides native speakers’ political orientation. Thus, foreign language education was utilized as the battlefield for the two concerns. The political and ideological concern, during this period, took precedence over the need for national development, and created highly politicized foreign language policies and curricula.

Effects. Due to its hypersensitivity to the political climate, FLEP in China during the Politicized period was criticized for problems such as inconsistent availability, frequent change in curriculum, and lack of planning to maintain a qualified teaching force. While all levels of education struggled during the Politicized Period, Li et al. (1988) observe that secondary education suffered the most due to the inconsistent availability of resources and frequent curricular changes. Before the mid-1950s, the status of Russian as the sole foreign language boosted the expansion of both Russian speakers and Russian language teachers, putting other language teachers out of work. However, a change of demand in the late 1950s left China with an overabundance of Russian teachers and a shortage of English teachers, leading to major changes in the foreign language curricula, and even several years where there was no foreign language education at all. As shown in Figure 1, the increasingly political English curriculum published by People’s Education Press underwent three hasty changes from 1957–1960. This frequent change of curriculum and the

Figure 1
FLEP in the Politicized Era

	1949–1956	1957–1960	1961–1965	1966–1976
International political environment	Involved in Korean War; Tension between mainland and Taiwan (US); Support from USSR	Support from USSR	Schism with USSR; Involved in Vietnam War	Nixon's Visit to China; Accession to the UN; Establish diplomacy with more countries
Domestic political campaigns	Suppressing counterrevolutionaries; Three-anti & Five-anti campaigns	Anti-Rightist Movement	A temporary retreat from political movement and more attention to economy	Cultural revolution led by radical leftists
Language choice	Russian	Russian dominant, English is rising	English's status is high while Russian's weight is much lower	English was available in some regions
Political message in English textbooks	N/A	Series 1: 27.66% Series 2: 67.65% Series 3: 96.80%	Series 4: 54.87% Series 5: 37.29%	50%–95%

lack of teachers meant that the quality of language education was low (Hu, 2001). The years leading up to the Cultural Revolution saw five changes to curriculum and textbooks, resulting in inconsistent learning for students as none of them could finish the series without disruption. Teacher education at the tertiary level also experienced the sudden expansion and shrinkage, leaving them unable to support the need for language teachers at any level.

To sum up, at this period, the political imperative imposed on FLEP sacrificed the quality of textbooks, teachers, and overall foreign language learning experiences for students. More importantly, the available rhetoric fed people with politicized understandings of the role, status and functions of a foreign language and strengthened the undesirable connotation of capitalism which happened to be in opposition to the ideology held by the CCP.

Economic Reform Era (1978–2002)

In this period, the economic interest of the Communist government took center stage. However, from time to time, the political interests resurged in different forms to remind people of English's undesirable Western ideologies and cultures detested by the CCP. After all, maintaining the legitimacy of the CCP was an on-going process. In this period, the ability to develop the economy of the nation was

just another important indicator of its efficient governance, and economic success profoundly consolidated the Party's legitimacy.

In terms of foreign language education, English had gradually gained supremacy in foreign language education as China opened up and integrated into the global economy. English dominance seemed to co-occur with the high-speed economic development, but it was also accompanied by and exacerbated the ever-deepening social inequality. Overall, the policies for foreign language education overestimated the need and capacity of English language education in China and overemphasized the unproven causality between English proficiency and national/individual economic development (Feng, 2009; Hu, 2005; Niu & Wolff, 2005; Nunan, 2003). In other words, in this period, foreign language was still grounded in an instrumentalist orientation, highlighting its economic value.

Conditions. The new government led by Deng Xiaoping had learned a lesson from the Politicized Period and shifted its focus to economic development with the Opening-Up and Reform Policy that gradually geared China towards a market economy. The accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 further confirmed the trend of opening up and of marketization and made China an important link in the global economy. However, the impressive economic growth was accompanied by rising inequality: the Gini Coefficient⁴ in China had risen from 0.29 to 0.45 from 1981 to 2001 (Naughton, 2008).

While the booming economy in coastal areas provided adequate infrastructure and human resources for foreign language education and the genuine need to nurture speakers of foreign languages who were likely to use English in their daily life and for commerce, this was not the case in the hinterland. The *Hukou* (Household Registration) System had sharply divided rural and urban people into two social classes with different entitlements to social welfare, such as healthcare and education (Naughton, 2007). Urban people were privileged with all benefits, while those who held a rural *Hukou* were denied welfare benefits even if they migrated to the city. Therefore, rural people either had insufficient resources in foreign language education in the countryside or had no access to it in the public school system in cities.

Besides the *Hukou* System, another significant structural change was the decentralization of the decision-making system which was meant to encourage governments at lower levels to strive for economic development (Shirk, 1993). In exchange for more discretion in economic decisions, local governments needed to shoulder the responsibility of managing the distribution of social welfare. However, this brought more indeterminacy and regional difference in foreign language education based on the capacity and the ideology of the local governments, which could exacerbate the existing social inequality.

Apart from structural changes, ideological control, though much lessened, resurged from time to time in different forms. In the early 1980s, just a few years after the initiation of reform and opening up, a political campaign called Anti-Spiritual Pollution was carried out to curb both the leftist legacies from the Cultural Revolution, and liberal (Western) ideas such as humanism and democracy which were at odds with the ideology of the CCP, but inevitably became more accessible

⁴ Gini Coefficient is an index that illustrates the inequality in a country based on income distribution. It ranges between 0 and 1. 0 represents perfect equality. 1 represents perfect inequality. 0.5 is considered a high level of inequality.

to people after the Opening-Up and Reform Policy. In 2001, the newly released Law of the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language (National People's Congress, 2000) stipulated that Mandarin Chinese was the only acceptable medium of instruction in educational institutions, and thereby technically outlawed bilingual programs in China (Feng, 2009). Although there was no action taken to dampen the English fervor under the name of this law, it at least suggested that the fundamental role of Chinese as the representation of the national identity and culture was officially acknowledged and protected by law. Therefore, whether English was going to continue its dominance in China depended not only on its overall influence in the world but also on how the government and the people in China positioned the language *per se*, the cultures associated with it, and its relationship with Chinese.

Actors. Three departments in the central government (two departments under the Ministry of Education and one committee under the State Council), were set up for language planning for Chinese languages. Due to the decentralized education administration during this period, the local bureaus of education also had freedom to define foreign language education policies regarding testing, curriculum development, and textbook production. However, a lack of systematic long-term planning and communication between the departments in the central government and lower levels of education bureaus precluded many problems. Hu and McKay (2012) observe that in some regions in China, the promotion of Chinese-English bilingual programs or English-medium instruction was initiated by the local governments only without checking the feasibility with higher levels of policy makers. At times, the Ministry of Education still released mandates regarding foreign language education, which were expected to be implemented nationwide even if they were not applicable for certain regions. Besides decisions made by formal institutions, other implicit policymaking such as using English as a gatekeeper in other sectors in society have contributed to the English fervor (Jin & Ding, 2008; Hu & McKay, 2012).

Decisions. Though English was officially recognized as the first foreign language in China in the 1960s, Russian learners still accounted for almost half of foreign language learners during the Politicized Period (Li & Xu, 2006). Not until the Economic Reform Era did English become the truly favored choice for foreign language education. The fear of English as an ideological threat had weakened significantly and it acquired an unprecedented status and critical role in modernization. Each version of the English curriculum introduced and reinforced the rationale for English as a tool for economic development (see Figure 2), while the availability of Russian and Japanese remained only in some border regions.

The rise of English was greatly facilitated by an education reform initiated in the 1980s (Hu, 2005) and reemphasized in the 1990s (Hu, 2007) that aimed at providing quality education for the enterprise of modernization. This reform affected foreign language education at every level. In the 1980s, the weekly instructional time for English at primary and secondary levels was made equal to that of Chinese (Hu, 2005; Hu, 1999), and its high status in China's exam-oriented secondary schools was solidified when it became a main subject (along with Chinese and math) on the college entrance exam in 1992.

Despite an overall push for English, a lack of resources limited its presence at the primary level until the late 1990s. Hu (2007) traces the expansion of English at this level to several education documents that were intended to deepen the

Figure 2

Role of English Defined in Curricula During the Economic Reform Period

Curriculum	Role of English (excerpts from curricula)
Series 6 in 1978	“English is a very important tool for international class struggle; for economic and trade relationships; for cultural, scientific and technological exchange; and for the development of international friendship.” (Adamson, 2004, p. 135)
Series 7 in 1986	“A foreign language is an important tool for learning cultural and scientific knowledge; to acquire information in different fields from around the world; and to develop international communication.... Foreign languages are listed as a basic subject in China’s secondary schooling.” (Adamson, 2004, p. 156)
Series 8 in 1993	“A foreign language is an important tool for making contact with other countries and plays an important role in promoting the development of the national and world economy, science and culture.... Efforts should be made to enable as many people as possible to acquire certain command of one or more foreign languages.” (Adamson, 2004, p. 173)
New Curriculum Standard in 2003	“Among the development strategies for basic education in many countries, English is regarded as a core component of the quality education for their citizens and is positioned as a priority.... The <i>status quo</i> of English education is not adequate for our country’s needs for economic and social development, and remains sub-par compared to the demand of the development of our era.” (Ministry of Education, 2003, Preface)

education reform, and to the big push from Vice Prime Minister Li Lanqing, who oversaw education from 1993 to 2003. He found the quality and scale of English education at primary level were not sufficient for the development of the nation, and issued a mandate to make English compulsory beginning in third grade. This mandate was meant to be implemented first by cities in 2001 and then by rural areas in 2002, but institutional barriers (e.g., *Hukou* system) kept it from being appropriately implemented nationwide.

At the tertiary level, starting from 1979, the Ministry of Education undertook a series of planning activities for enhancing college English education which included foreign language teacher training, specialized syllabi for different types of colleges, and the release of College English Tests (Feng, 2009). The State Council also released a tentative regulation for self-funded study abroad in 1981, which triggered more interest in learning English in college so as to score high on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (Hu, 1999).

There have been great improvements to English textbooks, curricula, and pedagogy, as well as a reduction in their explicit political content to less than 5% (Adamson, 2004). Since the 1990s, many provinces adopted textbooks that were collaboratively written by foreign (e.g., Oxford University Press) and domestic presses, with increased emphasis on communicative competence rather than on grammar-translation approaches (Hu, 2005). However, the few teacher training programs that supported this pedagogic change were of sub-par quality and varied greatly by region (Zhang, 2012).

The diversified curricular content has changed the role of English from a tool for political transmission to a way for students to gain more world knowledge and,

more importantly, locate themselves in an interconnected world (Orton, 2009). Even though there were signs that the government was wary of the disconcerting influences tied to English promotion coming to China, its economic value was deemed necessary in the push for modernization. However, this instrumentalist approach led the government to make hasty decisions promoting this language in China for economic interest without a reality check (Hu, 2007).

Effects. Two important issues must be taken into consideration regarding foreign language education quality in the PRC. Firstly, scholars (Hu, 2005; Hu, 2007) have called for a comprehensive needs analysis of English in school curriculum before it causes more burdens for both students and teachers. This issue subsumes questions of necessity, capacity, scale, and age of initial English language instruction. Despite the large population of English learners in China, English is still considered a foreign language (Pride & Liu, 1988). In rural or remote areas, an English teacher shortage continues to be a problem, and the few English resources that are available are purely test-oriented (Hu, 2005). The lack of professional support makes it difficult for teachers to provide quality education (Yan & He, 2012). Nunan (2003) cautions that the trend in Asia to push for an early start in English instruction is not supported by research in language learning. However, by overlooking these facts and problems, the hasty promotion of English has exacerbated the existing inequality between regions, social classes and ethnic groups (Feng, 2009) due to their varied access to educational resources both in and out of the public school system.

Second, it is necessary to reflect on why English is exacerbating social inequality in China. Hu (2005) observes that “since China embarked on its modernization drive, policy statements and mass media have constructed a discourse that has linked national English proficiency and socioeconomic development.... The discourse has fundamentally shaped the ethos of Chinese society” (p. 156). The discourse is instantiated by using English as a gatekeeper for upward social mobility, with high-stakes English tests essentially required for access to and exit from universities, for job-hunting and career promotion, and for the chance to go abroad. Although these gate-keeping measures are not explicitly written in national policy documents, their existence and wide acceptance among people reflects the belief that English is a tool for individual success. After all, the co-occurrence of China’s rapid economic development and the nation’s promotion of English make this connection plausible. In reality, however, most foreign investment in mainland China comes from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau (Chien & Zhao, 2010; Naughton, 2007). In addition to cheap manual labor, shared cultures and languages give the edge to investors from these areas. China’s economic rise is hardly associated with English skills. Therefore, the nation’s economic boom is related to, but does not result from, the nation’s growing English proficiency, a nuance that is often ignored by people who are immersed in English fervor.

Admittedly, English does play an important role at every front nowadays for people who have the authentic need to use it, but English proficiency of learners in China is still regarded as low⁵. Thus, while English learning for self-enrichment

⁵ English First, an international English training Institute generated EPI (English Proficiency Index), a ranking of the English proficiency of different countries based on the data collected from their free online English tests. In this ranking, China is listed in the column of “low proficiency”. Although EPI was criticized for its unrepresentative sampling, I find it at least does not inflate the average proficiency of English learners in China since those who have no access to Internet are less likely to have access to good resources for English learning.

should be encouraged, it is pivotal to realize that the link between English, social inequality, and all the roadblocks for upward mobility is perpetuated by people's acquiescence.

Transition Era (2003 and Onward)

This period is demarcated as separate from the preceding era in order to highlight the changing perception of English in light of the information revolution. This has contributed to new ideologies of English stirring debates at the ground level and has also coincided with changing perceptions of English and its relationship with Chinese culture and language at the central government level. As this is a contemporary period, the effects of decision making in foreign language policies are yet to be determined. Therefore, the following discussion is comprised of the present sociopolitical context, relevant decisions that have emerged, and a discussion about their potential effects.

Conditions. During this period, China has become further engaged in the international society. It has held the annual trade fair for ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) in 2004, hosted the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, and held the 41st World Exposition in Shanghai. All these international events in different fields have spawned campaigns for English learning in China's society, and even people working in civil services and public transportation in big cities are required to acquire basic communicative English to interact with foreign visitors. At the same time, the international society also expects more from China, the most populous country and second largest economy in the world, in regard to critical issues such as environmental protection, food security, and human rights. The lopsided economic reform, the lack of progress in democratization, and severe social inequality between regions, social classes, and ethnicities in China have raised concerns (e.g., Pei, 2009). The resulting social unrest finally pushed the Hu and Wen administration (2002–2012) to focus their work more on equity and harmony in society, at least as reflected in their propaganda. Well-intentioned policies focusing on the theme of education equity and access were promoted, but whether these policies can be translated into reality is still up to the local governments in different regions to decide. The most recent Xi and Li administration, while it does not intend to end the previous efforts for national stability, has shifted focus back to market-oriented economic reform, proposing the idea of the "Chinese Dream" to call for confidence in the party's governance and the country's future. This term is reminiscent of American Dream in that they both paint a promising future to inspire the people but differ in how they are manifested in reality (Cui, 2013).

On the ground level during the past decade, due to more affordable technological products and access to the Internet, people have found a better platform to voice their opinions. Although ideological control and censorship are still tight, people have also developed sophisticated skills to protect themselves and explore the real Worldwide Web by circumventing the virtual "Great Firewall" set up by the Chinese government to prevent access to any reactionary contents outside of China. But even within China, people prefer using BBS (Bulletin Board System) and microblogs to decry social problems around them in real life. Among them, the opposition to English fervor and its threat to Chinese language and culture have received increasing exposure.

Decisions and effects. The discourse that attributes national economic development and individual advancement to high English proficiency has not lost its glamour. Private English training and early language education have become lucrative industries, but attempts to improve the quality of English teaching within the school system are crippled by unprepared teachers. One such attempt occurred under the New Curriculum Standards of 2003, in which textbooks were revised and more communicative teaching methods were incorporated. However, these more communicative abilities are not included on high-stakes tests, and these new standards have been significantly compromised by the persistent lack of support for teachers (Niu-Cooper, 2012; Wang & Gao, 2008).

Meanwhile, against the backdrop of English fervor, the resistance to English and Western culture has risen and expanded from public discourse to policy papers in recent years. Gao (2009) observes that in 2006 there was an online campaign to reject Christmas, with comments alluding to the spirit of linguistic imperialism, and to using English as a self-strengthening tool by “learn(ing) English with clenched teeth” (p. 69). As reviewed above, during the feudalist Qing government and the Politicized Era, the language-people-country link has also historically evoked concern about national and cultural identity when dealing with foreign languages. In the same vein, the imagined rival relationship between Chinese and English was picked up again by Xuming Wang, the former spokesman of the Ministry of Education. He has been very vocal on Sina Microblog regarding deemphasizing the role of English. One of his posts reads “#Daily Appeal# ...The attachment to mother tongue cannot be severed. Cancel English classes in primary schools; add classes of traditional Chinese culture; ban the private English training classes in society for children; free the children, and save the Chinese language!” (Wang, 2013). While the Chinese language, counting Mandarin Chinese alone, has the largest number of native speakers in the world, what is endangered for Wang is probably the status of Chinese language and traditional culture in people’s minds. Of course, cutting English classes in public schools or beyond would not automatically promote Chinese culture, nor would it necessarily alter the gate-keeping role of English for upward mobility.

As part of school reform, however, the Ministry of Education issued ten rules for reducing the workload for elementary students, canceling all tests from grades 1 to 3 and allowing only one in-house school test for Chinese, math, and English in each semester for higher grades (Ministry of Education, 2013). Later in the same year, the city of Beijing also released its plan to reduce the weight of English and increase the weight of Chinese and math in future college entrance exams (Li & Gao, 2013). This trend of deemphasizing English was followed by other provinces, and some universities have officially announced that they would discontinue their local policy that links the College English Test to the college graduation diploma. This shift acknowledges the *de facto* English testing policy, since the Ministry of Education has never officially sanctioned any such requirement (Cai & Zhang, 2013). While the overall trend to sever the links between English and high-stakes tests is a step away from an instrumentalist approach to foreign languages, its instantiation at local levels are yet to be seen. Because test-oriented education has not changed fundamentally in China, the lower weight given to English in the tests is at the risk of being interpreted as English not being as important and therefore receiving fewer resources. The already low quality of English teaching could be

worsened under these circumstances. In a word, what seems an effective policy at the macro-level might have quite different results in the classroom.

For example, Liu, Shirohira, Kvietok, and Laziri (2014) describe a relatively developed coastal city in Eastern China where the bureau of education decided to simplify the English textbooks due to the growing population of migrant children without a local urban *Hukou*. Many of these migrant children have had limited English instruction before migration and it is quite difficult for them to catch up with their urban peers and follow the pace of English learning in their new city. However, this macro-level decision to simplify the textbooks could be problematic since the simplified textbooks and lower standards have the potential to water down the overall quality of English education in these public schools. More importantly, if that happens, only students from low socioeconomic situations will be negatively affected, as they mostly rely on low-cost public school and cannot afford the extra resources available for wealthier students. As further explained in Liu et al. (2014), the most concerning motive for this decision is the bureau of education's assumption that English is only related to more lucrative employment, which is unlikely to be reached by these children. This is a contemporary example of a utilitarian and deterministic view of English's role in the futures of migrant children. The removal of English from many high-stakes tests does not alter its importance as a critical social resource to help students ultimately find good jobs or succeed in business among other opportunities.

In addition to the varying local interpretations of macro-level policies, another question arises about the intentions of the CCP in the trend to deemphasize English. Minzner (2014) has found that since President Xi took office in 2012, party propaganda has been emphasizing the CCP's work on Chinese traditional culture. One example of this is a policy document called National Mid- to Long-term Reform and Development Planning of Languages (2012–2020) (Ministry of Education, 2014a), which was released soon after the Party's Congress in 2012 to show support for Chinese languages. Another example is the many new television programs foregrounding language and traditional culture that have been released by state television stations in the past two years, including the Chinese Character Dictation Competition and the Chinese Idioms Competition. One of the key working points for the Ministry of Education in 2014 is to promote the Chinese language (Ministry of Education, 2014b). Minzner (2014) is critical about these moves and finds President Xi "is appropriating the mantle of Chinese traditional culture to fashion a new image for one-Party rule, and sanitizing official representations of socialism to correspond with the economic realities and nationalist enthusiasms of recent years" (para. 3). This view sees the de-emphasis of English as just another political move in the field of education; if FLEP is an ideological tool that takes advantage of the nationalist view, as Minzner (2014) claims, the direction of the current trend in FLEP will be subject to many political decisions, similar to what occurred during the Politicized Period.

Conclusion

To answer the initial question of whether FLEP at the macro level is inescapably instrumentalist, this historical review of the case in the PRC demonstrates that much depends on language ideologies held by policymakers and other concurrent

ideologies possessed by the ruling class. In the Politicized Period (1949–1976), the chosen foreign languages (Russian and English) were both related to access to science and technology for modernization because nation building was one of the imperatives for a newly founded country. However, the connotations of these languages, and the degree to which they agreed with the ruling party's political ideology, made these languages loved and hated at the same time. Being perceived as both a tool for modernization and a threat to ideological control, foreign languages were eventually distorted into vessels for political transmission. In the Economic Reform Era (1978–2002), the political mania was replaced with a drive for modernization. English was favored for the economic development it was presumed to lead to. English fervor was embraced and fueled by both the government and individuals, the former by making policies enabling its expansion and the latter by actively participating in this process. However, due to institutional barriers, the push for English was entangled in growing social inequality, exacerbated by its presence in high-stakes tests. During the past decade, after playing the economic catch-up game with Western countries, China has made remarkable achievement in its economy, but problems abound in other fields. English is commonly considered to be the culprit for Chinese people's ignoring their traditional culture and language. This idea is taken up and promoted by nationalists, and emerging policies at the macro level seem to agree with it by lowering the weight of English in college entrance exams (Peng, He & Wang, 2013).

During the three periods described above, each time foreign language education worsened social problems or failed altogether, it was due to language being treated as a means to an end, highlighting one dimension, rather than as a holistic resource with many dimensions. To get away from this instrumentalist orientation, it is crucial to create a more diverse and democratic linguistic environment for foreign language education at the policy level while involving language learners in decision-making for their own education. For the country, providing its citizens with foreign language education at the policy level is inevitably strategic. However, imposing one particular language on citizens for the purpose of national goals, as shown in the first two periods in China, can have severe consequences. For the nation to truly treat foreign languages as resources, it is helpful to provide more language choice instead of English only in school curriculum, and allocate more resources for pre-service and in-service teachers in different languages to make foreign language education accessible. For individuals, foreign language learning should be a choice rather than an obligation. Linking language acquisition to life opportunities strips learners of their agency in deciding whether and which foreign language resources are needed for their personal enrichment. In this way, foreign language education will also become more prone to political manipulation, which will eventually undermine the nation's development in the long run.

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