

English in China Today

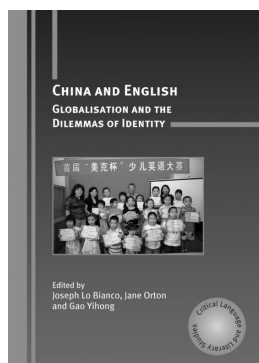
Joseph Lo Bianco, Jane Orton, and Gao Yihong (eds) *China and English: Globalisation and the Dilemmas of Identity*. Multilingual Matters. 2009. 304 pages. ISBN HBK: 13:978-1-84769-229-0 PBK: 13:978-1-84769-228-3

Reviewed by Kingsley Bolton, City University, Hong Kong.

The spread of English in contemporary Chinese society is one of the major educational and linguistic stories of the contemporary age. Currently, no-one is really sure exactly how many learners and speakers of English there are in China, although the available evidence suggests very large numbers indeed, with current estimates ranging from one hundred to three hundred million. Traditionally, English in China has been regarded as a foreign language, but in this volume Lo Bianco emphasises that the previous classification now needs recasting, noting that:

The sociology of English in China far exceeds its EFL-ness. Its presence in schools, colleges and universities, as a language of learning and use, and as a hurdle test for various administrative and higher education entry procedures, arises overwhelmingly for reasons of transnational utility. However, the depth of its penetration suggests anticipated domestic functions ... beyond what would normally be predicted by external utility. (Lo Bianco, 207).

Lo Bianco, Orton and Gao bring to the table a broad range of expertise in English teaching, language education, language policies, and sociolinguistics. Lo Bianco and Orton are both experts on English teaching and Chinese language policies based at Melbourne University,



while Gao Yihong is Professor in the English Department at the School of Foreign Languages, Peking University. Of the sixteen chapters in this volume, eight are contributed by the editors and deal with such issues as the historical background, cultural contact, English in the formal education system, and issues of language and identity. Equally interesting are the eight other contributions from young Chinese scholars, mostly PhD candidates or recent post-docs, who bring a quality of innovation and freshness to their discussion of the subject.

The volume is divided into five parts: (I) 'Western dreams, Chinese quests: habitus and encounter'; (II) 'Learners, identities, purposes'; (III) 'Landscapes and mindscapes'; (IV) 'Narratives'; and (V) 'English for China in the world'. The chapters contributed by the younger scholars employ a range of investigative methodologies, broadly sociolinguistic and social-psychological, and provide multiple insights into the current reception and perception of English in contemporary China. For example, in Part II, Li Zhanzi's thoughtful chapter compares two personal accounts of the learning of English as a foreign language by the Chinese Zhang Haidi and Russian Natasha Lvovich, thereby problematising issues of linguistic ownership and identity. In somewhat different yet still related vein, Bian Yongwei's contribution, also in Part II, on 'The more I learned, the less I found myself' tackles the issue of identity among Chinese college students, suggesting that students often 'lost self-confidence as English learners' and 'lost part of their cultural self as a Chinese'.

In Part III on 'Landscapes and mindscapes', Zhou Qingsheng's highly-informative chapter on 'Language, ethnicity and identity in China' focuses on the impact of the current spread of English on patterns of language learning in minority communities in China, a theme also explored by Xu Hongchen in his chapter on 'Ethnic minorities, bilingual education and globalization', although Xu's assertion that 'it is not the [official] intention that the study of *Putonghua* should eradicate ethnic languages or respective ethnic identities' is challenged somewhat by the Lo Bianco chapter which follows. Li Jingyan's contribution on 'Crazy

English' analyses the motivational underpinning of Li Yang's Crazy English movement, which, in spite of its controversial commercialism, Li suggests, 'is clearly more than just a passing phenomenon'. In the last essay in Part III, Li Zhanzi's second contribution presents a reading of Frank McCourt's novel *Teacher Man*, relating McCourt's biographical account of his identity and self-understanding as a teacher to the identity construction of Chinese teachers of English. In Part IV (on 'Narratives') Li Yuxia presents case studies of so-called 'failures' in English learning, while Liu Yi presents the results of her interview research with college English teachers. Both chapters employ similar methodologies to investigate the life stories of English learners and English teachers in the China context, yielding interesting results in terms of both depth and insight.

The contributions from Lo Bianco, Orton and Gao provide additional layers of investigation and theorisation. Gao's first chapter on socio-cultural contexts provides an excellent overview of cultural issues, while his second contribution surveys key areas of research relating to identity. The three chapters penned

by Lo Bianco and Orton provide not only theoretically-rich bookends but also important discussions of key historical dimensions as well. Late nineteenth century discussions of foreign languages in China were framed by the dichotomy between *ti* ('essence') and *yong* ('utility'), as in the adage 'Chinese learning for essence [*ti*]: Western learning for utility [*yong*]'. What is remarkable in this volume is not only the ways in which the discourses of this dichotomy resonate in the early twenty-first century, but also the ways in which new discourses, new problems and new opportunities emerge in the present. The editors are to be congratulated on this book, which offers an insightful blend of theory and empirical research. The fascinating and wide-ranging account of the status and functions of English in China today provided by Lo Bianco, Orton and Gao in *China and English* is essential reading for everyone interested in English in the Chinese context and in the wide range of educational and intercultural issues associated with the continuing story of English in China. ■

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