Language policy and learning experience in China: Six case histories

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Abstract

Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, three main language policies have been implemented. Firstly, Chinese was standardized with the simplification of the Chinese script and the propagation of Putonghua. Secondly, the codification of minority languages in China was carried out. Thirdly, in terms of foreign language enhancement, Russian was initially promoted but soon after 1957, English was identified as the most important foreign language in China. The only remission to this emphasis was during part of the Cultural Revolution. As a result of these policies, learners educated at different times have had different experiences. In this paper, the learning experiences of six learners differing in language background and age are presented. By and large, the individual learning histories reflect the policy changes in terms of general directions.

Introduction

China is a multidialectal and multilingual country. For the majority language group, the Han Chinese, there are two main groups of dialects: the northern dialects and the southern dialects. The northern dialects can be subdivided into seven sub-groups and the southern dialects into six sub-groups (Huang, 1987, p. 33-45). In addition, among the 55 ethnic minorities, over 80 languages are used (State Language Commission, 1995, p. 159). The official language in China is Chinese. The standard dialect, Putonghua, maps well onto the written form of modern Chinese. Since the mid 1950s, all Han Chinese have been required to learn Putonghua. At the same time, the minorities have been encouraged, though not required, to become bilingual in their native languages and Putonghua, especially more recently. In terms of foreign language learning, the language first promoted by the People’s Republic was Russian. When relations with the Soviet Union failed to develop, China began to look West and English resumed its importance, except during the early years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when all scholarly studies were repudiated. Other foreign languages of secondary importance in China include German, French and Japanese. Because there are
several dialects and languages at play in China, learners with different native dialects or languages have different learning experiences. The policy emphases at different times may also have affected them differently. In this paper, some case histories of learners from different backgrounds are provided to illustrate such variation.

**Language policies in China**

The People’s Republic has implemented and maintained three main language policies in the last half century:

1. The standardization of Chinese
2. The development of minority languages
3. The propagation of English

*The standardization of Chinese*

The standardization of Chinese took a two-pronged approach: in the script and in the pronunciation. In 1954, discussion on the simplification of the script was initiated. This was motivated by the hope that simplified characters would help to improve literacy rates. In 1956, the First Character Simplification Scheme was announced. It was confirmed in 1964 and reaffirmed in 1986. The Scheme contained 2,235 simplified characters and 14 radicals (a radical is part of a Chinese character). 1956 also saw the directive that all schools for Han Chinese should teach in Putonghua. Workshops to train teachers were organized. To facilitate the learning of a standard pronunciation based on Putonghua, a phonetic alphabet, *hanyu pinyin*, was publicized in 1958 (see State Language Commission, 1996, for details). Although Chinese dialects share one writing script, they can be quite different in pronunciation, word order for some constructions, particles and vocabulary. This is particularly true of the southern dialects. The northern dialect groups share more similarity in pronunciation though differences in tone and vocabulary still exist. Since the standard dialect, Putonghua, is a northern dialect, native speakers of the southern dialects have the greater learning task when developing their competence in Putonghua.

*The development of minority languages*

The total minority population of 91,200,000 constitutes only about 7.5% of the total population in China but they live in a widespread area of about
64% of the total area of China (Dai et. al., 1997, p. 10). Literacy plans for the minorities, also referred to as nationalities, are therefore not easy to implement. Before 1949, 20 of the 55 minorities already had a written form for their languages. From the 1950s up till the 1980s, new orthographies were developed for seven ethnic groups and orthographies were also modified or supplemented with additional Latin orthographies for another eight ethnic groups. The adoption of the Latin alphabet for several new orthographies was in line with the use of *hanyu pinyin* to propagate Putonghua (State Language Commission, 1996, p. 16). Although the minorities, apart from the cadres, have not been required to learn Putonghua, they have been encouraged to become bilingual in their own language as well as Putonghua (State Language Commission, 1996, p. 37). For minority groups small in numbers, educational or economic advancement may become possible only if they become proficient in Chinese.

*The propagation of English*

Recent foreign language teaching in China can be divided into six phases (Figure 1):

1. The interlude with Russian
2. The back-to-English movement
3. Repudiation of foreign learning
4. English for renewing ties with the West
5. English for modernization
6. English for international stature

When the People’s Republic was established, Russian was the most important foreign language for a short period. Many people have the impression that the learning of English was promoted only after the Cultural Revolution. In reality, English was accorded importance in China soon after relations with the Soviet Union became tense in the mid 1950s. As early as 1957, a draft syllabus for teaching English in junior secondary school was distributed. In 1961, the syllabus for English majors at university and college level was defined. 1960 to 1965 saw the establishment of some foreign language schools in China.
**Figure 1. Six phases in foreign language education in China**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical period</th>
<th>Phase in foreign language education</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before the Cultural Revolution</td>
<td>1. The interlude with Russian</td>
<td>Early 1950s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. The back-to-English movement</td>
<td>1957–1965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. English for renewing ties with the West</td>
<td>1971–1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After the Cultural Revolution</td>
<td>5. English for modernization</td>
<td>1977–1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. English for international stature</td>
<td>From 1991</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even during the dark years of the Cultural Revolution, Premier Zhou Enlai managed to deploy a remnant of foreign language majors to posts requiring foreign language expertise. In 1971, China replaced Taiwan in the United Nations and in 1972, Richard Nixon, President of the United States of America, visited China clearing the way for exchange between China and America. After the Cultural Revolution was over and university admission resumed in 1978, more attention was paid to English for non-English majors and English in schools. With Deng Xiaoping’s Policy of Four Modernizations announced in the same year, the prominence of English escalated and has not abated since. (See Lam, 2002, for details.)

**The experience of learners: Six case studies**

Policy changes have been experienced differently by learners from different backgrounds. Here are excerpts from six learning histories with interviewees differing in language background, age and occupation.

The learners were interviewed in Putonghua during fieldtrips to China in 1999 and 2000. Interviewees had all completed university and were contacted through the universities. Although the majority of learners in China do not make it to university, these interviewees were chosen to give an idea of the language learning experience at every educational level. Each interview took about an hour. Interviewees were prompted to speak freely on their language learning experience. In the following excerpts, the interviewee’s age was that
in 2000. All names are pseudonyms. The interviewer’s comments are in square brackets.

**Figure 2. Six case histories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Native language</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yan</td>
<td>Northern Chinese</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Political scientist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xin</td>
<td>27 Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Foreign language teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tian</td>
<td>Southern Chinese</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Chinese language teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danny</td>
<td>28 Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hotel employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fang</td>
<td>Minority language</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Nationalities expert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He</td>
<td>29 Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Computer scientist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Yan (Northern Chinese Interviewee 12, male, aged 44, political scientist)_

**Background.** I was born in 1956 near Changan [now Xian]. I started going to school in 1962. In those days, because of the Cultural Revolution, school was irregular. There was no clear graduation from primary school to junior secondary school. In 1970, I went to a senior secondary school about seven or eight _li_ (a _li_ is about half a kilometre) away from home. I was the only one from my class that entered a senior secondary school. In 1973, I returned to my village as a _zhi_1 _qing_1 [intellectual youth]. I worked as a farmer in our production brigade. From 1975 to 1977, I studied at a Teachers’ College in Xian. After that, I taught politics for half-a-year in a secondary school. In 1978, the universities resumed admission and I came to this university [in the northern interior]. Upon graduation in 1982, I started teaching political science here.

**The Xian dialect.** I spoke the Xian dialect from birth because it was spoken around me. I was educated in the Xian dialect even during my junior secondary schooldays. We did not bother with language matters very much then. Even in senior secondary school, not every teacher taught us in
Putonghua. My Chinese teacher even pronounced my name wrongly in Putonghua. He was a good teacher though.

**Putonghua at Teachers’ College.** It was only during my Teachers’ College days that I had a teacher who emphasized the standardization of the Chinese language. He was a member of the National Script Reform Committee. He prepared materials on the differences between Putonghua and the Xian dialect and requested that we should use Putonghua in class and when conversing. There was also another teacher who left a deep impression on me. She was from the south of Shaanxi. There were some characters she could not pronounce in the standard way. She was always asking the other teacher how to pronounce some characters correctly. These two teachers made a big impact on me. I became willing to speak and to learn Putonghua.

**Other Chinese dialects.** Time and again, I visited other cities like Liaoning, Beijing, Wuhan and Chengdu to attend short courses or conferences. I can understand several Chinese dialects because of my contact with speakers of different dialects, especially during my visits to other cities. During my visits, it was natural to speak Putonghua. In Liaoning, for example, for half-a-year as Visiting Scholar, I only spoke Putonghua.

**Russian.** In senior secondary school, the foreign language I studied was Russian. I still remember sayings like ‘The people’s commune is good’, ‘Wish Chairman Mao ten thousand birthdays’, ‘The East is red’. I have forgotten everything else.

**The handicap of poor English.** I started learning English at university. I did so for two years. I have always considered it important to learn English. Even after graduation, I still tried to learn it on and off but I did not succeed. I always put it aside when I was involved in a research project. When I do my research, I am happy when I discover something. It is a kind of beauty. But in learning languages, this satisfaction seems to be missing. I think it was because I learnt English intermittently that I could not learn it well. This is my regret because my failure to learn English well is a big handicap to my research and my career. Because my English is not good, I always get my information secondhand and I cannot publish my research findings for foreigners to know. My level of thinking is not below that of others but I lack the tool of language. Besides the effect on my research, there is also a practical issue. If we wish to get promoted, we must pass a foreign language examination. You can choose to take this examination in any foreign language. In this region, it is usually English or Russian.
Xin (Northern Chinese Interviewee 26, female, aged 27, English teacher)

**Background.** I was born in 1973 in a village in Shandong [in the northern coastal region]. I went to the primary school in my village. For secondary school, I attended a more proper county school but teachers there still taught in our \( jia^1 \ xiang^1 \ hua^4 \) [home village speech]. In 1992, I came to this university [in the northern interior]. Now I teach English here.

**The Shandong dialect.** I learnt the Shandong dialect definitely from imitating my family while young. My teachers and classmates also spoke this dialect, even in secondary school. When reading passages aloud in class, we used Putonghua. When we conversed, we used our \( jia^1 \ xiang^1 \ hua^4 \). Even our Chinese teacher used our \( jia^1 \ xiang^1 \ hua^4 \) to teach us.

**Putonghua at university.** When I left home to go to university, because they could not understand the Shandong dialect, though it was very similar to the standard dialect, I imitated other people and spoke Putonghua. So I actually learnt how to speak Putonghua only from 1992. Before that, I was exposed to Putonghua through the radio and television. When I first started speaking Putonghua at university, I had to overcome many difficulties, such as in tone and vocabulary. The main difficulty was tone.

**Dialect switching.** I spoke Putonghua at university but when I went home to Shandong, I spoke my \( jia^1 \ xiang^1 \ hua^4 \). The first summer I went home, I found my behaviour very funny. Everyone was speaking my \( jia^1 \ xiang^1 \ hua^4 \). I knew I should too but when I forgot how to say something in my \( jia^1 \ xiang^1 \ hua^4 \), I used Putonghua. They were very surprised and I did not even realize it. Later, I was aware of that. After one or two years, I began to switch between my home dialect and Putonghua easily. Now I can speak my \( jia^1 \ xiang^1 \ hua^4 \) the moment I get off the train; the moment I get back onto the train, I can switch to Putonghua.

**Inferiority.** Because I grew up in a village, when I came to university in this big city, I felt inferior. I did not dare to speak with other people in my dialect. Some classmates came from Beijing and other big cities. They could speak Putonghua very fluently and communicate their thoughts very well. So I wanted to imitate their Putonghua pronunciation or some of their sentences that were more fun.

**Interest in learning.** I studied English from junior secondary school. My first English teacher spoke standard English fluently. She was very young and
had such perfect pronunciation. Because of her, I became interested in learning English. I have maintained this interest all along. In junior secondary school, we began with the alphabet and learnt a lot of grammar and vocabulary. Only in my last year in senior secondary school did I begin to converse in English because there was an oral English test I had to pass to take English as my major.

**Dormitory life.** Once I entered university, there were many more lessons in oral English and more practice even outside the classroom. Seven of us shared one room in our dormitory. We were from different provinces and spoke different dialects. Since we were all English majors, we decided to speak English the moment we entered the dormitory. We forced ourselves to converse in English. We did this for one semester. I also listened to tapes and saw foreign movies. Sometimes, I listened to the news programmes on CCTV [a national channel]. Sometimes I listened to VOA [Voice of America] or BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation], but I did not do so often because the reception was not clear. The transmission from CCTV was clear. We also tried to talk with our *wai4 jiao1* [foreign teachers] more so that our spoken English could be more standard. Every year, we had one or two *wai4 jiao1*.

**German.** It was compulsory to learn a second foreign language. When I first started learning German, my interest was greater. I was very attentive in listening to the teacher and I could say a few sentences. But in the graduate courses, the emphasis was on grammar and I paid less attention. I listened to some tapes and we watched some videos. The teacher stood next to the videoplayer and explained in Chinese.

*Tian (Southern Chinese Interviewee 24, male, aged 38, Chinese teacher)*

**Background.** I was born in 1962 in Jiangxi [in the southern interior]. My first dialect is Kejiahua [the Hakka dialect]. I spoke Kejiahua till I was 18 when I came to this university [in the northern interior] in 1980. I graduated in 1984. Since then, I have been teaching Chinese here.

**No market for Putonghua.** At school, we were taught in Kejiahua. What the teachers spoke was closer to written Chinese but it was not Putonghua. In pronunciation, it still seemed like a dialect. After classes, my classmates and I conversed in Kejiahua. In junior secondary school, we had a very young music teacher from the local region. Her husband was from another region. So she spent some time with him elsewhere. She could speak very standard Putonghua. In her first lesson, she tried to teach in Putonghua; the whole class laughed because we were not used to being spoken to in such
standard Putonghua. When the class was over, the students imitated her way of speaking and said she was singing. After that, she did not dare to teach again in Putonghua. Later in secondary school, there were two teachers who came from other provinces and spoke fairly standard Putonghua. Since they were from elsewhere, they did not mind speaking to us in Putonghua. In our region at that time, there was no market for Putonghua. Unless you were from another province, if you spoke Putonghua, people would think you were trying to da³ guan¹ qiang¹ [speak like an official] and would laugh at you or talk about you. Kejia [Hakka] people have a saying ‘Rather sell the land from the ancestors than change the speech from the ancestors.’

**Putonghua at university.** I was exposed to interaction in Putonghua only when I came to this university. Because this is a big city with many people from other provinces, Putonghua is commonly spoken, especially on campus. Throughout my four university years, I spoke only Putonghua, except when I was with friends from my home village. My Putonghua became more and more standard year by year. Now I am equally fluent in Kejiahua and Putonghua though some people say my Putonghua has a southern accent. I do not know. When I was in the south, my Putonghua pronunciation was considered standard. But to northerners, my Putonghua is non-standard and has a southern accent. My vocabulary may also have elements from my dialect.

**English for university admission.** For people my age, the learning of English only began at a very old age. We started learning it only when our senior secondary education was about to end. At that time, university admission had just resumed. It was for the purpose of gaining entry into university that we all learnt English. We had very little time to prepare for it. So we all gave up. We went to the English lessons but read other books during the lessons. When I entered university, my English was at zero level. I only knew the alphabet and 40 or 50 words. Because my English was so poor, I was assigned to learn Japanese.

**Japanese.** I studied Japanese for four years but did not learn it well. I have lost most of it.

**English for work.** After graduation, because of occupational needs, I started learning English. My university organized a course for young teachers – twice a week in the evening, two hours each time. But I did not keep up with the course. In 1990, there was another intensive course but again I did not keep up with it because my wife gave birth to a baby and I was very busy taking care of the baby. In 1998, the university sent me to another university
for half-a-year to study English. It was at that time that I learnt English more systematically. The course was to prepare people to take an examination so that they could be sent overseas by the State for visits or attachments.

The painful way. I also tried learning English on my own using tapes and books such as *New Concept English*. It was a very stupid and painful way to learn. Recently, I learnt a lot from browsing web sites in English. I can now manage simple everyday conversations and read articles in my discipline. But my writing and listening are not too good. My English is ‘handicapped’. Many learners of English in China are in this situation. If we could learn by conversing with a native speaker, it would be more enjoyable.

Danny (*Southern Chinese Interviewee 18, male, aged 28, hotel employee*)

**Background.** I was born in Gulangyu [an island off Xiamen in the southern coastal region] in 1972 and went to school and university in Xiamen. I studied management as an undergraduate. In 1993, I began working at the reception counter of a hotel. In October 1998, I came to this university [also in Xiamen] to study English.

**Minnanhua, Putonghua and respecting others.** I speak Minnanhua [a Fujian dialect] and Putonghua equally well. I learnt Minnanhua from my grandmother who took care of me. Putonghua was not used at home. When I was four, I went to kindergarten and was taught in Putonghua. Outside the classroom, my classmates and I still conversed in Minnanhua but we spoke Putonghua with the teachers. In Xiamen, we have a lot of visitors from other provinces. In a group of three or four people, if one does not speak Minnanhua, we immediately switch to Putonghua. This is a kind of respect for that person.

**Cantonese.** I also learnt Guangdonghua [Cantonese] from television dramas and video-tapes from Hong Kong. In the hotel where I worked, we had some visitors from Hong Kong and Macau. Some overseas customers also spoke Cantonese. Around 1994 and 1995, I met a Cantonese friend from Hong Kong who could not understand any Putonghua. Since I was interested in languages, I bought two or three Cantonese tapes and spent two or three weeks listening to the tapes ‘with all my life’ [with total dedication]. I wanted to communicate with him. Besides, in my industry, knowing one more language is very advantageous. In 1997, when I went to a world tourism exhibition in Hong Kong, I could shop in Cantonese.
**English.** I started learning English from Primary 5. I could handle writing and the examinations but my listening and speaking were very poor. A friend with a relative overseas bought some tapes and hotel management books for me. There was a book on conversations at a five-star hotel. But it was difficult for me to learn by myself. When I went home after work, I was rather tired. I studied Unit 1. After a few days, I did Unit 2. Then I stopped and forgot everything and had to start from the beginning again. So I know Unit 1 very well. Anyway, the hotel I was working in was only a three-star hotel so the requirements were not very high. In 1996, I tried applying for a job in the Marco Polo Hotel. At the interview, they were very happy I already had a few years of experience. They did not even bother to look at my certificates. They asked me to speak English with them. I could understand but could not speak fluently. In 1998, I worked at a private club for half-a-year. There were some foreigners going to that club. I thought if my English was better, I could do better. So I quit my job and came here [a university in Xiamen] to really learn English, not for a qualification.

**Learning programme.** In my first year here, I had 20 lessons per week. This year, I have 16 lessons. On weekends, I have nothing to do. So I watch English television, CCTV4 [a national station]. I like watching foreign movies. I also have a DVD [digital video-player]. A friend of mine bought some tapes from outside. You could alternate between five or six languages. The first time I watch a video, I remove the subtitles. From the body language, I can guess what is said. The second time, I watch it with Chinese sub-titles. After I have understood it, I watch it a third time with English sub-titles. It takes a lot of time but I like American movies. If I have energy left over at night, I listen to VOA [Voice of America]. I also read *China Daily* and some magazines. That helps my vocabulary.

**Happiness from communicative success.** Once my father had a visitor from America because he works in a branch company of Kodak. I took the visitor around with a friend. I was 15 or 16 then. My friend could talk with the visitor but I could not say a single sentence. When I worked at the hotel, though my English was not good, I could say a few sentences. The other staff could not. So they treated me with admiration. Actually, I could say only a few phrases or keywords. Once a businessman came from the Middle East to do business in something I did not know the English word for. But when I said he was selling hats and bullets could not go through them, he immediately understood and laughed. About half-a-year ago, an Indian visitor came here to do business. When he found I could speak English, he was very happy. I was very happy too.
**Fang (Minority Learner Interviewee 9, female, aged 51, nationalities expert)**

**Minority language.** I was born in 1949 in a Zhuang village among the mountains of Guangxi [in the southern interior]. Before I went to school, I spoke only the Zhuang language. In 1956, I began my studies at a very small village school. Everyone spoke the Zhuang language there. There were only four grades in that primary school. Students from two grades studied in the same classroom. When the teacher was teaching one grade, students in the other grade would do exercises. In the whole school, we had about 60 students.

**The Guiliu dialect.** In 1959, I left my village to study in another primary school. It was still a village school but a better one. My father was working as a cadre in a state farm. I was an only child so my father sent for me. My mother remained at our village. My grandmother went with me to live with my father. I enrolled for Primary 3 in that school. The teachers spoke the Guiliu dialect. I also learnt that dialect from my classmates. When I visited my classmates’ homes, sometimes we spoke the Zhuang language and sometimes the Guiliu dialect. I continued to speak the Zhuang language with my father and grandmother. When buying things, I would use either the Zhuang language or the Guiliu dialect. No one spoke Putoughua with me then but Chinese (yu3 wen2) was taught in Putonghua at school. Other subjects were taught in the Guiliu dialect. One year, I failed my Chinese.

**Secondary school in Putonghua.** In 1962, I went to another place to attend junior secondary school. Everything was taught in Putonghua then. But outside the classroom, everyone spoke the Guiliu dialect. In 1965, I started studying in a senior secondary school. The teacher required us to read newspapers at night and we listened to radio broadcasts in Putonghua.

**From intellectual youth to cadre.** In 1969, I ‘went down to the village’ (xia4 xiang1). [During the Cultural Revolution, educated people were sent to the villages to learn from the farmers.] At the place I went to, the Zhuang language was spoken. I was first a farmer; then, in 1970, I was ‘taken out’ to be a worker in an orchard. After half-a-year, I was ‘taken out’ to teach the children of other workers in that orchard by myself. I taught four primary grades and a total of 50 or 60 children. In 1973, I became a cadre in the same orchard. I expanded the school to one with six teachers, one for each grade, and became the principal. We taught in the Guiliu dialect. I also took care of women’s matters in that compound – divorces, fights, quarrels. We also established a youth group and I was the deputy secretary. I started a broadcast programme too. I wrote the scripts and did the broadcasts myself. At night,
sometimes we organized Hanyu [Chinese] classes for the workers; they could not even write notes to ask for leave.

**Nationalities studies.** In 1979, I came to this nationality institute [in the southern interior] to work in the resource and information centre. In 1984, I was sent to Beijing to study. About 20 of us prepared for the admission examination. Only two of us gained admission. In 1986, I returned to teach nationalities studies here.

**Russian.** I studied Russian in junior and senior secondary school. Because there has not been any opportunity to use it, I have forgotten all of it. I have never studied English.

**Wide repertoire.** My best language now is Putonghua, especially when writing. My second best is the Guiliu dialect. The Zhuang language is my third best. Then comes Russian. I can also understand some Kejiahua and Yueyu and speak a little of the Yao language with our Yao neighbours.

*He (Minority Learner Interviewee 3, male, aged 29, computer scientist)*

**Background.** I am from the Hui minority group and was born in a village in the Ningxia Autonomous Region in 1972. I only attended one-and-a-half years of Primary 1 and 2. I did not go to Primary 3 because the school was closed at that time. Only after the Gang of Four was destroyed [the end of the Cultural Revolution] did I go to school again. I went straight into Primary 4. I completed my primary and secondary education in Ningxia. In 1989, when I was 17, I came to this university [in the northern interior] to study engineering. I was the only one from my home village who could go to university. Upon graduation in 1993, I started working in the Computer Centre of this university. From 1998, I have been teaching computer system maintenance.

**Arabic.** Before I went to school, I learnt a little Arabic at home and mostly at the ‘Muslim temple’. All the Hui children went to the temple to learn Arabic. It was one big class, with 10 to 20 children altogether. The master would give us individual work according to our levels. We memorized extracts from the Koran. When I started school, I learnt Arabic at the temple only intermittently. I learnt to write a little Arabic too but I have forgotten it. However, Islam is still my religion. The Hui people have adopted the Chinese language but language is language and religion is religion.
Chinese dialect and Putonghua. At home, most of the time, we spoke the local northern Chinese dialect. I also spoke it with my friends and classmates or when buying things. I started learning Putonghua only when I went to school at nine or ten. In secondary school, the Chinese (yù3 wen2) teacher would play tapes to us to train us to speak Putonghua. Almost all the teachers taught in Putonghua but the influence of the Chinese teacher was the greatest. He was always carrying the tape-recorder just to play tapes to us. After school, I did not practise much because my family circumstances were not so good. We could not afford a tape-recorder or receive broadcasts. My classmates were in a better position. They had tape-recorders, could receive broadcasts and had more books at home.

From Chinese words to stories. I felt my Chinese dialectal pronunciation was a hindrance to my learning Putonghua; because my pronunciation was not accurate, I could not figure out the words. By Primary 3, my classmates already knew many words. I knew very few. Learning Chinese was very, very painful for me in my primary and junior secondary schooldays. I often failed my Chinese. In junior secondary school, I spent about two years reading books of folktales and fairytales in our town library. Then I could link up the words into sentences and the sentences into texts. That was how I learnt Chinese – from memorizing words and from reading those stories. I did not consciously try to practise speaking Putonghua to learn it better. When I went to university, my Chinese dialect became Putonghua by and by though we had no Chinese lessons then. My best language now is Chinese.

English. I started learning English only in senior secondary school so I was weaker than other students in English when I went to university. They had learnt it for six years by that time; I had only studied it for three years. Outside class in my schooldays, sometimes I would do some exercises in English but not often. At university, studying English was also rather strenuous. The classes were very big. The teacher talked. A lot of people listened together. Outside class, there were some English activities, like the English Corner. Some people went to those activities but I did not because I felt my English was not good. I passed the Band 4 Exam [a national English examination for university students]. I think my English is just average now. Reading and listening – I am okay. But speaking and writing – I cannot handle them.

The Internet. Before 1995 or 1996, we were not connected to the Internet. When we became connected, what we first did was to send emails. We did so in English. Now every day, I get onto the Internet. Sometimes, I
come across some web sites in English. I am not afraid of reading web sites in English. I can read through them slowly.

**Conclusion**

These six case summaries can only give some indication of the variation in language learning experience in China. There are other background circumstances not touched upon in the excerpts such as other age groups, other first dialects or languages and other occupations. Limited as they are, these individual histories do reflect the general policy directions and allow us to make a few observations. Firstly, while policy makers could give directives, because economic conditions vary so much across the vast land of China, policies might not have been fully implemented in some locations, particularly in the poorer rural areas. Secondly, while the policies (especially the propagation of English) suffered setbacks during the Cultural Revolution, China seems to have managed to develop largely in the same directions after that. Putonghua, for example, has become more widespread through the years and is now the medium of interdialectal communication. Thirdly, the motivation to learn English seems to be present in all the interviewees, albeit to different degrees, except for Fang, the nationalities expert, who perhaps already has her needs met by her success in learning Putonghua. Fourthly, a minority language learner nowadays appears to have to cross two linguistic hurdles (Putonghua and English) before educational success can be within reach. Fifthly, a comparison of older learners (Yan, Tian and Fang) with younger learners (Xin, Danny and He) shows that conditions for learning Putonghua and English have definitely improved; learners in recent years have more learning options and more technical support. Finally, policy discussions aside, learners in China, at least those in these interviews, seem to have some understanding of how and why they succeed or fail in language learning. That in itself is an achievement.

**References**


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